

YK 2013 5774

As I listened to the other wonderful Divrei Torah of this year- Rebecca, Josh and Uri-I tried to think about the ways in which they might all be connected. Was there an inner theme at work this year, a meme of Torah circulating about.

After Shabbat Shuvah the meme surfaced. It was Rabbi Akiva who brought the teaching together. Rebecca spoke of ways to make sense of the suffering of the 10 Martyrs and Rabbi Akiva's final act of loving God b'chol nafsho.

Josh spoke of the Torah that Akiva fashioned from the the crowns upon the letters of the Torah: the songs of attunement that sit above meaning.

Uri spoke of using words to love and not destroy. And Akiva was the Rabbi who advocated for the love poems Shir ha Shirim to be canonized in our Torah.

So, is there anything left for this clean-up position? What remains to be known about Rabbi Akiva that can assist us on this Yom haDin, this day of Kapparah, At-Onement, day of spilling our hearts to God through poetry.

You know, of course, that the answer is yes. Rabbi Akiva continues to teach us through his words and the example of his life.

In the Midrash Avot de Rabbi Natan there is a tale about Rabbi Akiva. It starts with the phrase "<Mah Tehilato shel Rabbi Akiva"? What is the beginning of Rabbi Akiva? When did this person named Akiva begin to come into his Akiva-ness that we use as a source of inspiration today?

"It is said: Up to the age of forty he had not yet studied a thing. One time, however, while standing by the mouth of a well in Lod (where he will later stay up all night and

celebrate the Pesah) he asked “Who hollowed out this stone?” and was told “Akiva-- you rube-- don't you know that pasuk in Job `4:19 “water wears away stone?” It was water from the well, constantly falling on it day after day.

At that moment R. Akiva asked himself: Is my mind harder than this stone? I will go and study at least one section of Torah. He went directly to the schoolhouse, and he and his son began reading from a child's tablet. R. Akiva took hold of one end of the tablet and his son the other end. The teacher wrote down alef and bet for him and he learned them. from alef to tav, to the book of Leviticus and he learned it. He went on until he learned the whole Torah...”

Rabbi Akiva was a master of personal transformation in life and in death. He begins as an illiterate shepherd. and becomes one of the greatest teachers of Torah who has ever lived. It is also said of him in the Gemara Pesachim 109a that he never left the Bet Midrash except for two occasions: the evening of the seder and the evening of Yom Kippur. Like Abraham, his transformation, as we know, came at great cost to his wife and family. But like Abraham he was also granted an almost unsurpassed intimacy with God.

So, how does the example of Rabbi Akiva help us face the demand of this day, that we commit to change in our lives in some way. The example of Akiva is so extreme and in that way matches the actions of Abraham. It this necessary or even possible for us?

So let me turn to the idea of change and suggest some ways to think about that I hope will be personally helpful.

What is the language of change in our liturgy? In Hebrew the word for change is Shinui, like the word Mishnah or Veshinantam which means instruction. Is change simply something that we are instructed to do and so just do it.....? How many people have

you met who comply with all the advice around them telling them what is good for them?

Just before the Vidui, just after we implore God to

Shma Koleynu Adonai Eloheynu, verachem Aleynu. veKabel berachamim et tefilateynu.

Hear our voices Lord God and accept our prayers compassionately.

We say some lines from the end of Eicha

Hashivenu Adonai Elecha veNashuva
Hadesh Yamenu K'Kedem.

Change in these lines is a moving backwards, a Shuvah, return and a Chidush, renewal of times past.

Now, I can see this with respect to Tisha B'Av. We long to go back home to the Temple where we could experience God physically, directly.

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But what is it doing here in the Vidui? We sort-of want a going back to sacrifice so we can designate some goats, shpritz some blood and affect kapparah/protection from God's wrath.

But only sort-of. Our longing for change that is returning and renewal has become more complex over the millenia.

Can I really change by looking backward and renewing where I was before?

I am going out on limb and saying no....

While I long to have back certain days or years of my life: certainly to be with my parents, other loved ones, meet David Shapiro for the first time once again, hold my own children as babies on my lap, I do not believe that going back to that version of myself would make me a better person today.

In general, it seems to me that the move towards change and teshuvah are directed toward the future, harnessing wisdom that may be acquired in the past to face forward. Rebecca spoke truthfully with she said that age brings a satisfying wisdom in relationship to life's end, which may feel compensatory, but which is satisfying all the same.

How can we selectively scoop up the past and face forward with meaning and integrity?

Over the summer I read a book called " The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves by a British psychoanalyst named. [Stephen Grosz](#).. No surprise that his father was a Hungarian Holocaust survivor. Grosz deals with the complexities of change in a sensitive and vivid way.

As he says:

At one time or another most us have felt trapped by things we find ourselves thinking or doing; caught by our own impulses or foolish choices; ensnared in some unhappiness or fear; imprisoned by our own history, We feel unable to go forward and yet we

believe that there must be a way ‘ I want to change, but not if it means changing” a patient once said to me in complete innocence.

Because my work is about helping people to change, this book is about change. And because change and loss are deeply connected--there cannot be change without loss-loss haunts this book....

Grosz hones in on an essential aspect of change. It requires loss, a giving-up of something that can cause sadness. We want to avert our ears when the Akedah is read, because in God’s demand to Abraham we go through the emotional paces of loss-take, give up, what is most precious to you, what is of your body, what you love and destroy it in order to stand on a mountain and see something differently. Who can hear these words, or hold images of the goats led to sacrifice and not cringe because we feel the intensity of giving something up, of losing something of value.

And this seems to be what is asked of us on Yom Kippur, To go down into the deep feelings of loss that we all have for one thing or another and let it go in order to change.

Grosz presents some wonderful cases

One patient, named Philip, was a compulsive liar. He would create situations where the people around him knew he was lying but were too polite to call him on it. He told his daughter that he was fluent in French and until the day she asked him to help her with her homework, and watched her seven-year-old face realize that her father had been lying to her. What was Philip doing? In treatment it came out that as a young child with twin younger siblings, the only time Philip had his mother’s undivided attention and closeness was when she would cover up the fact that he was a bed wetter, saving him from the wrath of his stern father, When his mother died, this closeness was

severed. So Philip had devised a way to hold onto this co-opting form of intimacy. To give up this habit and change, Philip had to suffer the loss of his mother all over again and let go of her for good.

After 25 years as a psychoanalyst, Grosz says that the challenge of personal change continues to surprise him:

“ We resist change” he says “committing ourselves to a small change, even one that is unmistakably in our best interest, is more frightening than ignoring a dangerous situation.

We are vehemently faithful to our own view of the world, our story. We want to know what new story we’re stepping into before we exit the old one. We don’t want an exit if we don’t know exactly where it is going to take us, even--or perhaps especially--in an emergency. This is so, I hasten to add, whether we are patients or psychoanalysts...

Or Jews on Yom Kippur....

On this day we are meant to transcend our bodies by denying them, but transcend our heart and minds by denying them too.

We have to go down into our stories, the ones we tell about our lives our cover-ups, platitudes, “self-esteems,” and face with honesty those nooks and crannies that we hold for self-protection and comfort.

We have to give up control (which is what it means to face imminent death-my talk from last year), give up the comfort of what others say about us, face the empty spaces between all “the stuff” and “detritus” Go in, feel the pain and then....let go.

Perhaps we should have the creeping suspicion and betrayal of Isaac climbing up the mountain as he begins to feel the set up.

Perhaps we should feel like a fragile goat, traipsing over some rocks into a vast expanse of who knows what.

Perhaps we should shake with terror that Roman soldiers are about to arrest us, I am not sure. But I think we are meant to turn this day of YK into a day of **deep feeling**, not a feeling of guilt, but a feeling of sadness and loss. Tears are the feelings released as water from our souls. Sighs, moans, quiet.

And once we get **there**, to that place, perhaps we are finally poised for change. Not a renewal but a new form of self.

As Grosz writes:

Psychoanalysts are fond of pointing out that the past is alive in the present. But the future is alive in the present too. The future is not some place we're going to, but an idea in our mind now. It is something we're creating, that in turn creates us. The future is a fantasy that shapes our present.

I find this statement utterly life-affirming and comforting. IF I DO THE WORK of losing my past, I already have at hand what my future will be. There is no need for anxiety about the future because it is already known, embodied in my present self.

As a community we can feel our future in this present moment. The opportunities for teshuvah, tefillah, tzedaka and Torah are so exciting and full.

But as individuals let me share this prayer or thought:

God, on this YK let me refrain from nostalgia that will hold me back. I do not want to be re-newed or re-storied to the person I was before. Rather, let the remnants of who I have been and what I have done act as ashes on an altar of a newer person, unafraid to make deep and sustainable changes. Be with me as I face these fears. Even as I remember and remind on these days of Zicharon, let me please focus on my own capacity to be a grandchild or Rabbi Akiva who taught us all the power of transformative love. Let me be able to say that this day of Yom Kippur is not a question,

Mah Techilati,, but a true day of Techilah, the beginnings of my new self for this year.