

Teshuvah stories

Have you ever lain in bed at night thinking about the moments when you could or should have done something - but didn't, the moments when you know that you could or should have been braver, stronger, quicker to action, or more principled - but weren't? I'm sure I'm not the only one who ever has that happen to them, who ever gets stuck in your head, in those moments. What do you do about those moments where you get stuck? How do you move forward?

I was reading a novel recently in which one of the characters, a guy named Buddy, had the power to be able to see people's pasts and futures. He could see what did and what would happen to everyone he met, at all of the different points along the timelines of their lives. He lived a very troubled life, because he always had difficulty differentiating between the past, present, and future versions of everyone he knew. He could never really be present, never live his life as it was happening, because all of the conflicting versions of people and places and events that he saw were competing for attention in his head. He lived life lost in a sea of past and future memories, and while he wanted to use his powers for good, he sadly could only help people whose future troubles he could see. There was nothing he could do to help you with the things that had happened in your past.

I've found this idea particularly relevant as I've been thinking about Teshuvah, the practice of repentance that Jews are supposed to engage in at this time of year. As I'm sure you know, we're supposed to evaluate what our lives have been like over the past year, who we've done what to and what we're

sorry for, and try to make amends for the things we've done wrong, to apologize and try to make up for the moments when we've missed the mark. While having Buddy's powers might make the soul-searching part of the process easier, it doesn't address one of the biggest problems with this kind of work - we can't travel to different points in our past to correct the mistakes we've made. Instead of being able to literally repair those fissures, to correct our missteps, we instead have to talk to the people our actions impacted - sometimes long after the fact - and try to atone for what we didn't do back then, whenever that was. While we can't un-do whatever we did, we're expected to address our actions, and to try to make up for them. And, perhaps most importantly, to learn from what we did, and to try to do better next time. When you add all of those actions together, you get Teshuvah.

As I talked about last week at Rosh Hashanah, I believe that doing Teshuvah is one of the key ingredients to bringing about culture change, to helping the world return to being a less stratified, more communally supportive place. Trying to address the things we've done incorrectly while not berating ourselves for what we've done wrong, but instead hoping to learn from our mistakes in order to try to do better, is a path towards living with less blame and denigration, and more mutual respect. Doing Teshuvah can be a way to genuinely make the world a better place.

With that intention in mind, tonight I'm not going to share a full talk with you, but instead share a couple of stories about Teshuvah, which are meaningful to me. It is my hope that these tales might help you in your

Teshuvah work, on your path to doing better, and that in some small way, our world might be better as a result.

I'm going to share one of these stories now, and another one later in the service.

The Turning of the Moon

[based on Hulin60b, Madras B'reishit Rabbah 6:3, and Midrash Konen BHM2:24-27, found in Chosen Tales edited by Peninah Schram pp293-5]

Once, the sun and the moon were the same size and cast the same radiance. This was not pleasing to the moon. "Look at that! Look at that sun!" the moon huffed. "If we are both the same size, how will everyone know that I am more important? This sky isn't big enough for the two of us!"

The moon pondered the possibilities. Hmmm... only the One could set things right. So the moon went to God to lodge a complaint. "There is not enough room for me and the sun in the sky. As you can plainly see, we do not even have space to turn around!" The moon paused before adding, "This is not good. This is not just." Proud of this speech, the moon waited for God's answer.

God listened, thought about the situation, then spoke. "You are absolutely right, moon. Justice must be done. You cannot both be the same. Thank you, moon, for bringing this to my attention."

Swelling with pride and feeling itself grown larger already, the moon suddenly felt a stab of pain, and a hurt coming from deep inside. "God! God!"

cried the moon, “look at what is happening to me! I am shrinking! Help me!”

The moon grew smaller and smaller.

Then God spoke: “You were right, moon. It was not good that you and the sun should be the same size. You were the one who was not satisfied. You wanted justice. So, now you have your wish. One of you is greater: the sun.”

The moon looked at its diminished body and began to weep. “But God! That’s not what I meant!”

“Still, you must learn to be satisfied with what you are.”

“What am I, anyway? A small and insignificant ball of light? Look at me!”

“For that pride, you shall give up your light as well. From this day forth, the only light that you shall shed will be reflected from the sun.”

“What? My only light from... that... sun! How could that be? I can turn from my ways. Believe me, please!”

“Moon, you will indeed turn. And so will the people who gaze at you from the Earth. They will see you turning, from darkness to light. They will see you appear to grow larger and smaller each month, and they will see that, by turning, you can once again grow whole.”

The moon wept, tears of moon glow falling from the sky. “But God, I can repent. I am truly sorry, and I see the error of my ways. Please help me. I am lost in the dark sky.”

Filled with compassion and mercy, God gazed into the heart of the moon and saw that the moon had repented. but what has been decreed by God

cannot be undone, only altered. “Moon, you shall rule in the night sky as the sun rules in the day.”

“But over what shall I rule? What is there? And, what has become of me?”

“Your domain shall be the night. People will look into your night sky and be filled with wonder. The sun is too harsh, too bright to behold. Your light shall be a comfort to the traveler and the dreamer. They will gaze upon you and ponder the wonder of the universe.”

“This is a comfort to me. But I will be so very lonely.”

With that, God bent down and gathered up the pieces of moon glow and placed the small pieces of light high up in the sky. “These shall keep you company,” God said. “They are the sparks of what you once were. These are your tears of repentance. They shall be called the stars.”

The moon looked to the night sky where tiny points of light glimmered. “But God, how will I ever regather all of the sparks?”

“There is no need to gather them all, sweet moon. Your sparks shall fill the whole sky from one end to the other. You will fill the whole sky... and you will remember.”

May we all better recognize the moments when our pride overcomes our sense of right and wrong, and may God be merciful with all of us in the inevitable moments when we don't live that way.

The Cottage of Candles

[by Howard Schwartz

https://blog.oup.com/2006/09/a_lesson_for_yo/]

There once was a Jew who went out into the world to seek justice. Somewhere, he was certain, true justice must exist, but he had never found it. So he set out on a quest that lasted for many years. He went from town to town and village to village, and everywhere he went, he searched for justice, but never did he find it.

In this way many years passed, until the man had explored all of the known world except for one last, great forest. He entered that dark forest without hesitation, for by now he was fearless, and he went everywhere in it. He went into the caves of thieves, but they mocked him and said, “Do you expect to find justice here?” And he went into the huts of witches, where they were stirring their brews, but they laughed at him and said, “Do you expect to find justice here?”

The man went deeper and deeper into that forest, until at last he arrived at a little clay hut. Through the window he saw many flickering flames, and he was curious about them. So he went to the door and knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Nothing. At last he pushed the door open and stepped inside. Now, as soon as he stepped inside that cottage, the man realized that it was much larger on the inside than it had seemed to be from the outside. It was filled with hundreds of shelves, and on every shelf there were dozens of oil

candles. Some of those candles were in precious holders of gold or silver or marble, and some were in cheap holders of clay or tin. And some of the holders were filled with oil and the flames burned brightly, while others had very little oil left.

All at once an old man, with a long, white beard, wearing a white robe, appeared before him. "Shalom aleikhem, my son" the old man said. "How can I help you?" The man replied, "Aleikhem shalom. I have gone everywhere searching for justice, but never have I seen anything like this. Tell me, what are all these candles?"

The old man said, "Each of these candles is the candle of a person's soul. As long as the candle continues to burn that person remains alive. But when the candle burns out that person's soul takes leave of this world."

The man asked, "Can you show me the candle of my soul?"

"Follow me," the old man said, and he led him through that long labyrinth of a cottage, which the man now saw must be endless. At last they reached a low shelf, and there the old man pointed to a candle in a holder of clay and said, "That is the candle of your soul."

Now the man took one look at that flickering candle, and a great fear fell upon him, for the wick of that candle was very short, and there was very little oil left, and it looked as if at any moment the wick would slide into the oil and sputter out. He began to tremble. Could the end could be so near without his knowing it? Then he noticed the candle next to his own, also in a clay holder,

but that one was full of oil, and its wick was long and straight and its flame burned brightly. "And whose candle is that?" the man asked.

"I can only reveal each man's candle to himself alone," the old man said, and he turned and left. The man stood there, quaking. All at once he heard a sputtering sound, and when he looked up, he saw smoke rising from another shelf, and he knew that somewhere, someone was no longer among the living. He looked back at his own candle and saw that there were only a few drops of oil left. Then he looked again at the candle next to his own, so full of oil, and a terrible thought entered his mind.

He stepped back and searched for the old man in every corner of the cottage, but he didn't see him anywhere. Then he picked up the candle next to his own and lifted it up above his own. At that instant the old man appeared out of nowhere and gripped his arm with a grip like iron. And the old man said: "Is this the kind of justice you are seeking?"

The man closed his eyes because it hurt so much. And when he opened his eyes, he saw that the old man was gone, and the cottage and the candles had all disappeared. And he found himself standing alone in the forest and he heard the trees whispering his fate.

And he wondered, had his candle burned out? Was he, too, no longer among the living?

May we all live with less self-interest, and more courage. May we be bravest at the most significant moments, when the realities of our lives are

exposed. In the moments when we face the Ultimate - as we all do, all day, today - may we be able to face the truths that we will encounter then, and may we live in a way that will make those encounters somewhat less uncomfortable.