

Divine Equilibrium

Yom Kippur Morning 5778

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Years ago, an Episcopal Priest and I led a discussion with our two congregations, “Jew and Christians Talk about Sin.” I emphasized that Judaism places the onus on the penitent who wishes to be free of past misdeeds. We must confess. We must apologize. We are the one charged to change our ways. We gather on Yom Kippur to pray for God’s forgiveness. And our responsibility isn’t complete until we have offered acts of *tzedakah*, often translated as “charity,” but really meaning, “justice.” We are obligated to make the world right after we have done wrong.

I am a strong believer in this process of repentance, but I was faced with a challenge from the interfaith audience. An Episcopalian lay person rose and asked, “But Rabbi, don’t you pray that God reaches into your heart, changes your heart of stone into a heart of fleshⁱ, aiding you in your work to change your ways?”

My interlocutor was right. Jews often criticize Christian theology, which seems to leave much of the responsibility to a God who forgives with boundless grace. We, on the other hand, have a tendency to place all the burden upon ourselves. Yes, searching our souls is important. Yes, confession is required. And yes, we are the ones who must change our ways. At the same time, we might ask: Why have we come here, specifically to the synagogue, for our repentance? Judaism’s response is best summed up in a beloved line from our prayer book: “Pray as if everything depended on God, but act as if everything depended upon you.”ⁱⁱ On Yom Kippur, we ask God to be our divine Partner in our work of transformation.

Judaism doesn’t always have an easy time balancing God’s role with our own.

The problem begins with creation. The mystics wonder: How can we have any role in this world at all if God is all-powerful. Rabbi Isaac Luria answers with a story. He imagines that, before creation, God fills all potential space with divine light. Determined to create, God must contract – withdraw Divine presence, if you – will.ⁱⁱⁱ Only then can stars and planets and all living things conform to natural laws; only then can humans have free will. God, with the ability to be all-powerful, has resolved to limit that power. We are in charge of our own actions and

responsible for them, and therefore on the hook for repentance when we've done wrong.

So what happens when we look for God at a time of trouble? Our tradition is conflicted. Our matriarch Rebekah turns to God as she suffers through a painful pregnancy. She goes "to inquire of Adonai," who explains that she is expecting twins, fathers of two nations, already fighting in her womb.^{iv} Rebekah seems to be comforted, as she pursues the primacy of Jacob, the younger twin, whom God has described as "stronger."^v

The rabbis who approach this passage are oddly ambivalent. They seem not to believe that Rebekah could've gotten that message directly from God. They anachronistically imagine that the matriarch seeks the word of God through a Talmudic academy, centuries before such a thing existed.^{vi} Torah suggests that we can approach God directly and that God will respond to us. The sages aren't so sure.

A strange *midrash* about King David may help us. David is not permitted to build the Jerusalem Temple; however, the rabbis imagine him digging in the chosen spot to make space for the foundation. The trouble is that he digs too deep – so deep, in fact, that he reaches the primordial waters that covered the Earth before creation. Released from their vault, those waters threaten to destroy the world.^{vii} David now intervenes to prevent catastrophe. He takes a stone, and on it, he writes God's holy Name, four consecrated letters that we pronounce as "Adonai," but which our sages considered too sacred to be uttered. David throws the stone into the water, causing it to subside too deeply, triggering an opposite cataclysm. With the water so removed, Earth would be devoid of the water required for life. David then calls upon God's name again, singing his psalms of ascent, that word "ascent" now understood literally as biblical verses inviting the waters to rise.^{viii} The waters return to their safe level. Equilibrium is achieved. The world is saved.

The story is about moderation. We know all too well that it's a true story about water. After the last six weeks, nobody needs to explain to us how too much water can be a bad thing; and we know about drought, as well.

The *midrash* is also a metaphor about God. If God remained all-powerful, human beings could not possess free will; we would be drowned out. If God were absent, we would parched, without nourishment for our souls. If God were to overwhelm us with automatic forgiveness, requiring no effort on our part, we

would not become the better human beings we are commanded to be. But neither can we be left to do the work of repentance alone, in a drought of Divinity. God sets the path for our work of repentance. God takes our hand and reaches into our hearts. God graciously empowers us to free ourselves of sin.

Our ancient rabbis differentiated our responsibility from God's: "For sins against God, Yom Kippur provides atonement; but for sins against another person, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement until we have sought forgiveness from the one we have harmed."^{ix} I wonder if the familiarity of this *Mishnah* obscures its point. We may pray with faith that God forgives when our transgression doesn't hurt another person. When the damage does extend beyond ourselves, we must apologize. But our obligation doesn't end there. The *Mishnah* still requires Yom Kippur atonement, which is to say God's forgiveness, even after we have settled the matter with the person we've hurt.

When we have cheated in business, we must make restitution and ask God's forbearance.

When we have been unfaithful in marriage, we are enjoined to seek forgiveness from the spouse we have betrayed and from any children or others who may be "collateral damage." Even if everyone involved has absolved us of guilt, we must still bring our sin before God.

Like all of you, I find myself on the guilty side of these equations every year. This year, I also received a most meaningful High Holy Day apology, relevant to this morning's topic.

On Memorial Day in 2016, my son Daniel and I climbed Pinnacle shortly after a rain shower. On the way down, I slipped on a rock, slammed against a tree, and fractured two ribs. Nothing can be done about broken ribs except to treat the considerable pain. Adding to the discomfort, the medication was stolen from my room while I was on a trip. The thief was quickly apprehended, my medication was restored late the next day, and I put the matter behind me.

More than a year later, the day after Rosh Hashanah, a letter arrived in the mail. I didn't recognize the name on the return address. I didn't know the person who had stolen my pills, but he turns out to be Jewish. He is also an addict, now in recovery. The letter described his efforts to heal. He also confessed that he had said he was sorry so many times in his life that he no longer expects his apologies to be accepted. He offered anything, whatever I would name, to find forgiveness.

My response began with the pain I endured in the twenty-four-plus hours between the time he stole my pills and the time the prescription was rewritten. The thief, however penitent, wouldn't benefit from my suggesting no harm was done. Just as quickly, I was eager to forgive. Mindful that our atonement process includes *tzedakah*, and seeking to provide the response he requested, I suggested donating to an organization that both my correspondent and I would value. Finally, my forgiveness secured, I urged him to seek God's in the synagogue on Yom Kippur.

This Yom Kippur, like every year, we come before God as imperfect human beings. Each and every one of us has done wrong. We have work to do – confession, apology, changing our ways, prayer, and *tzedakah*. Judaism offers no shortcut to repentance. Let each of us engage in the effort this Holy Day requires. And let us repent with faith that God is our Divine Partner, ever ready to reach into our hearts to help us repair our lives.

Amen.

ⁱ Based on Ezekiel 11:19, among other similar passages.

ⁱⁱ Popularized in Reform Judaism in *Gates of Prayer* (New York: CCAR Press, 1975). Attributed to Ferdinand Isserman in the index of *Mishkan T'filah* (New York: CCAR Press, 2007.) Others attribute to St. Augustine, updated by Ignatius of Loyola.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an explanation of the Lurianic creation myth, see Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme, *Finding God*, New York: URJ Press, 2002, pp. 74-76.

^{iv} Genesis 25:22-23.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Genesis Rabbah 63:6.

^{vii} Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 52b.

^{viii} Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a. Both texts cited in this paragraph were taught by Melila Hellner-Eshed at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Jerusalem, July 11, 2017.

^{ix} M. Yoma 8:9.