

Yom Kippur Sermon 5784  
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Rewriting our Stories

Good Yuntiv,  
How wonderful to  
see everyone here this evening.

This time of year  
we Jews are called  
to engage in  
one of the most challenging  
interactions of being human-  
that of asking for  
and granting forgiveness.

Indeed some of our holidays  
are a bit easier to stomach.  
Take Passover,  
our springtime festival  
when we recline at long tables  
and weave for our children  
the miraculous tale of the Israelites  
journey from slavery to freedom.

Or what about  
just five days from now  
when we'll don our fall jackets  
and spend time in the Sukkah

So many of our Jewish holidays  
engage us with sights,  
smells and compelling narratives.  
They are joyous and fun!

But this time of year is different.  
Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur  
aren't organized

around stories  
from the past.  
No, these days  
center on us,  
on our lives and our stories.

According to tradition  
We prepare for today in part  
By doing an accounting of our souls  
and examining  
how and  
when  
we have harmed others.

We ask questions such as:

- Were we kind to family, friends and strangers or more concerned with our own needs?
- Were our hearts open to others or were we shut off?
- Did our speech bolster those we love or shut them down?

Our tradition teaches  
that once we answer these  
challenging questions  
we are to take a next step  
Ask for forgiveness  
for the harm we've caused.

Today on Yom Kippur  
we both pray to God for forgiveness  
*and* garner the courage  
to ask for and  
grant forgiveness from others.

No we can't change  
what's already happened,  
that's done,  
but we can endeavor  
to be the authors of our future.  
But asking for forgiveness  
is hard and it's risky.  
Will we be forgiven

by the person we hurt?  
Will our actions  
cause a relationship to end?

And will we forgive  
another when they ask forgiveness from us?

Rabbi Harold Kushner  
reflects on the difficulty  
of forgiveness  
when he teaches that  
“Every time ..... We (decide how to act), we (confront) the memory of how we have responded  
to similar situations in the **past**. A voice inside our head tells us ‘this is the way you have  
chosen‘ to act (before)” and therefore you should ...(act that same way) again.”

Indeed most of the time  
we revert to habit.

Remember Pharaoh?  
When Moses petitions him  
on behalf of God saying “Let my people”,  
Pharaoh refuses.  
Kushner teaches  
that the more Pharaoh  
says no,  
the more he is likely to say *no* again.

He creates a story for himself  
that he is someone  
who says no to freeing the Israelites.  
And so each time he is asked,  
it becomes increasingly difficult for him to change<sup>1</sup>.

We are like Pharaoh,  
in that we each have  
stories we tell ourselves  
about who we are,  
how we act in the world  
and about the relationships

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, in *The Sunflower*, 1998. p. 184

we have with others.

These stories help us  
interpret the past.  
They keep us safe  
in the present and  
bolster us for the unknown.

Our stories help us navigate  
our relationships  
and act in the world.

And yet, sometimes  
these stories keep us  
locked in a cycle of  
pain and fear.

At times our stories  
flood us with guilt,  
sadness and anger,  
when with hard work,  
we could feel a little more joy  
and wholeness.

We could be a bit more free.  
When possible,  
we *deserve* to edit our stories,  
and write a new narrative of our lives.

To be clear,  
asking for or  
granting forgiveness  
does not erase the wrong that occurred.  
For even when restitution can be made,  
the past can not be erased.  
But forgiveness can free up space  
in our minds, our bodies and our souls.

Indeed inherent  
in the *risk* of forgiveness  
is the positive, possible outcome  
that we **can** rewrite our stories  
and make them anew.  
So how do we do this?

12th century rabbi Maimonides  
teaches in his laws of Teshuva or repentance,  
that when one seeks forgiveness  
from someone they harmed  
they must *speak to them directly*

If the person who was harmed  
refuses to forgive,  
the offender must try again,  
approaching them in person  
and apologizing *two more times*.

But, if after three attempts,  
the victim still refuses  
to grant forgiveness,  
the perpetrator can stop asking.

Then, according to Jewish law,  
the person who refuses  
to grant forgiveness  
is now at fault,  
they have now caused sin  
by refusing to forgive<sup>2</sup>.

For Jews forgiveness  
is a two way street.  
Both parties have to be  
invested in change.  
Both parties must  
have a stake in the future together.

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<sup>2</sup> Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva, 2:9-10, 1:1

Maimonides' teshuva process  
predicates itself on a face to face conversation  
and on using speech to heal.  
In our time, face to face conversations  
can feel a little bit old school.  
Perhaps we prefer to write an email or text.

But a face to face conversation  
when seeking for forgiveness or granting it  
helps us to see the humanity of another.

When we look someone in the eye,  
we sense their frailty and our own.

From there, we can decide  
to change the narrative  
and accept forgiveness,  
because we hope for a better future.

Yet here is the painful part.  
Maimonides steps to asking forgiveness  
are not a full solution  
to the many ways  
we have been hurt  
or have caused harm to others.

I wish there was a perfect system  
but there is not.  
There are situations of trauma  
in which forgiving  
the person is not possible,  
as they have acted  
outside of the bounds of human decency.

In those cases we can't forgive them,  
nor should we necessarily  
. Instead we can set boundaries  
to keep ourselves safe,  
and we can recreate stories  
to restore us to wholeness,

even as we take the painful step  
to write certain people out of our story.  
Each of us *can forgive ourselves*  
in order to be more gentle with our own souls.

Let's return for a moment to Pharaoh  
and the exodus narrative.  
When we teach this story to our kids  
and retell around the Passover table,  
out of necessity we  
keep the narrative simple.

Pharaoh was bad, and  
Miriam, Moses and Aaron were good.  
We tell the tale with little nuisance.

But a closer look  
at the actual text reveals  
that it's not so simple.  
At one point in the narrative,  
after the horrific plague of locusts  
overcomes the country,  
Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron  
and pleads "I stand guilty before Adonai your God and before you. Forgive my offense<sup>3</sup>.

Wow, who knew?  
Pharaoh apologizes?!  
His plea for forgiveness  
propels Moses to ask God to halt the plague.

But don't get too excited,  
soon after God stiffens  
Pharaoh's heart again  
and once more,  
Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go.

Indeed change is hard.  
And more importantly  
According to Maimonides

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 10:16-17

forgiveness is just the  
first step in the  
teshuva or repentance process.

According to Maimonides,  
successful teshuva,  
truly returning to our better selves,  
is measured by how we act when faced  
with the same situation in which  
before we caused harm.

If this time we act differently and make a better choice,  
then our teshuva is complete.<sup>4</sup>  
For Jews teshuva happens through  
*by our actions*,  
we must *show that* indeed we have changed.

There is more to Pharaoh's story  
At the climax of the Exodus narrative  
the Israelites walk through  
two high walls of water to freedom.  
And after, we read in our text  
that the water closed in on the entire  
Egyptian army *ad echad*-  
often translated as “not a single one remained”<sup>5</sup>.

Yet 8th century midrash  
Pirkei d’Rabi Eliezar  
reads the preposition *ad*  
as inclusive of one person  
instead of exclusive.  
This midrash understands “ad echad” to mean that  
The entire army drowned “but one person remained”.  
And that one person  
left standing was....Pharaoh<sup>6</sup>!

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<sup>4</sup> Hilchot Teshuva 1:1

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 14:28

<sup>6</sup> Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezar, 43



Pharaoh was forced to survive  
in order to face up  
to the harm he had caused<sup>7</sup>.

Now the rabbis,  
famous for their fanciful interweaving  
of characters, times and places,  
Take us on a journey with Pharaoh  
To Nineveh where he becomes the king.  
Nineveh!- that's right,  
the same Nineveh  
we'll read about tomorrow  
in the book of Jonah.

According to the midrash  
“when God sent Jonah to deliver  
a prophecy to Nineveh about its destruction,  
Pharaoh (now the king there) heard and  
announced a public fast  
imploring his people  
to *change* their evil ways.

Pharaoh becomes a role model of teshuvah!  
The ancient rabbis gifted us this story in which even  
Pharaoh's hardened heart softens,  
he asks for forgiveness,  
albeit imperfectly and ultimately  
he renews his life.

If Pharaoh can change,  
Then certainly so can we.

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<sup>7</sup> Daat Zkenim on Exodus 14:28:1 Daat Zkenim on Exodus 14:28:1  
אחד לא נשאר בהם עד אחד, “to the last man.” The word עד is sometimes used as an *inclusive* statement whereas other times it is used as *exclusion*, i.e. in this instance the meaning is that only a single Egyptian survived this drowning. The survivor was Pharaoh himself. ... The Torah refers to all of Pharaoh's soldiers having perished. Pharaoh himself was forced to survive and bear the disgrace of his defeat.

Rabbi Kushner teaches

“to be forgiven is to feel the weight of the past lifted from our shoulders..... Being forgiven means liberating ourselves from the idea that we are still who we used to be, and freeing ourselves to become a new person<sup>8</sup>.”

I pray that as we stand together  
over the next 24 hours,  
as one community  
on this most holy day of yom kippur  
That this time will be a step in our process of teshuva.  
That these hours of contemplation will  
Grow our compassion and grace and help us  
To forgive those who ask it from us  
I pray that these moments of reflection will  
Increase our humility and our courage  
to ask for forgiveness from those we've harmed.  
And that together we begin  
to rewrite our human stories  
in the service of becoming more free.

Kein Yehi Ratzon.

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<sup>8</sup> The Sunflower, p. 184