

Your Purpose Is Everything

Over the past few years, I spent a fair bit of time at Mass General Hospital, accompanying my spouse Gina on various appointments. In each of the examination rooms in the cancer center, on the inside of every door, there is a sign that says this:

"Confirming your identity will be a repetitive process while here at MGH."

I love that. "Confirming your identity will be a repetitive process while here at MGH."

Because the truth is, confirming our identity is a repetitive process everywhere, not just at MGH. We spend an enormous amount of energy, much of it unconscious, confirming our identity. We remind ourselves constantly of what we like and don't like, where we want to be and not be, what we're good at and not good at. We tell stories about ourselves all the time. Sometimes we just tell those stories to ourselves; sometimes we post them on Facebook or Instagram or other places on the web that I am completely unaware of, telling all who'd like to see. And we ask other people to affirm that sense of who we are - to like it, to agree or disagree with it.

All of these little actions accumulate into a sense of me, Toba, my self. One of my meditation teachers once referred to this process as "self-ing," an ongoing task of constructing a sense of self. I don't just feel anger; I am angry. I don't just enjoy pizza; I am a 'pizza lover.' I don't just drop something, I am clumsy - or smart, or stupid, or funny, or shy. In a million ways I am "self-ing" all the time.

Now this is not necessarily a bad thing; it's hard to move through the world with no sense of self. Knowing where I end and you begin is important. Having a sense of where I come from and where I hope to go is important as well. But as we gather here on the threshold of a new year, as we enter into the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Turning, of Returning, we are given an opportunity to investigate this investment we've been making into "me," "myself."

Our tradition is adamant that the process of *teshuvah* is a transformative one. Not only can we atone for past wrongs, we can make ourselves completely new. In the words of the Hasidic master, Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, for *teshuvah* to be effective, I need to believe that I can become an entirely new creation, at any moment.

But how is that possible? How can a self, this accumulation of experiences and memories, likes and dislikes, convictions and contradictions, all become something else, just because I want it to be so?

It is possible to deconstruct the self from a number of angles. Sometimes I like to imagine what it would be like to view myself from the perspective of a proton, a quark, something that functions on the level of quantum mechanics. Then all these boundaries - between me

and you-all, between me and this podium, between my guitar and the Torah scroll - all these boundaries would be meaningless. I imagine that on that level, everything would appear as waves of energy and motion, and "Rabbi Toba" would have no more substance than the dinosaurs who once walked the earth.

In Buddhist teachings, the "self" is an illusion, a compendium of phenomena that arise and pass but have no real substance. Physical sensations, emotions, thoughts - if we pay attention to them, we see that they are no more "Me" than the wind or a cloud, because they have no permanence. This moment I might experience anger, but a little bit later I will experience joy; the thoughts I am having now will become something quite different if I wait a few minutes. Even this physical body will one day disappear, turn into something else. Constructing a sense of self takes constant effort, in this view, because the underlying reality is that what I experience as "me" is really just a series of passing phenomena.

This notion of the ephemeral self, the transient self, can be found in our Jewish tradition, as well. In fact it becomes fairly prominent during the High Holydays. In the midst of the Unetaneh Tokef, the prayer at the center of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy, the human being is likened to dust, to grass that withers, flowers that fade, shadows that pass, clouds that float away, a dream that vanishes from sight. We are ephemeral, insubstantial, in comparison to That which is eternal, the underlying Reality of the universe itself.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, the claim is made that all of existence is God, all is One, and the appearance of distinctions is a kind of illusion. If we had eyes to see it, all boundaries of physical reality would fall away, and we would be able to perceive the essential Godliness of all of Creation, ourselves included.

But, the tradition teaches, most of the time we can't handle that kind of awareness, so we encounter the familiar world of you and me, this and that, boundaries and distinctions. We seek, through spiritual practice, to dissolve those boundaries, to experience the Oneness that underlies our physical reality, but those moments of apprehension are, for most of us, rare, if they ever occur at all.

So let's come back to the reality that most of us experience most of the time. I'm up here, you are over there. I am not my guitar, and my guitar is not the Torah or the chair. If you asked me, "who are you?", I could answer in a number of ways. I could tell you stories about my life, from my childhood to this moment. I could tell you things that I believe to be true and important. I could share my likes and dislikes, the things I am passionate about, my fears and anxieties. I could do the DNA ancestry search that they advertise on TV and find out the origins of my genetic material, which parts of the world my biological ancestors came from.

None of that would be particularly problematic, or "wrong," even though I'm not sure the sum of all those things would necessarily be "me." Should I be attempting to let go of this notion of "myself," like the Buddhists and mystics say? Is there a problem with "confirming my identity" over and over and over again?

So now I come back to the question I posed earlier: can our sense of self, our constant efforts to affirm that we exist, be an obstacle to the work of *teshuvah*? Can my conviction that I am who I think I am get in the way of seeking a new beginning? Can it keep from making real change?

When I was growing up, I had a complicated and sometimes difficult relationship with my father. He was a very strong personality, and I often felt I had to push him away to make room for myself. There was a lot of anger and confusion on my part, a lot of walls that I put up. One day, in college, when I was in my early 20s, I was saying something about my dad and my relationship to him to a good friend. She listened, and then she said, "I actually don't believe you. I don't think you really feel that anymore." And I realized in that moment that she was entirely correct. I had been telling myself this story for so long that I still believed it, even though I no longer felt it.

A number of years later, while I was in rabbinical school, there was some aspect of my personality that had become problematic. I knew I needed to make a change, to stop acting in this way, but I was afraid that I would disappear if I let go of this aspect of myself. My then girlfriend convinced me, with good humor, that that was not the case; that I would continue to exist in the absence of this particular personality trait. But I was truly terrified that somehow letting go of this defining characteristic would lead to the disappearance of my self. Of course, it didn't, and today I have no memory of what that supposedly defining characteristic even was.

I think this is not an uncommon experience. We spend so much energy confirming our identity, telling stories about ourselves, that we can't see beyond the story. Change is impossible in this situation. If I am more wedded to my notion of who I am than being open to who I might become, then there is no real possibility of *teshuvah*, of turning onto a new path.

Our ideas of self can go wrong in a number of ways. For example, I can become wedded to the idea that I am a good and righteous person. Maybe as a person who considers herself to be kind, I am oblivious when I hurt someone else. Maybe as a "good" white person, I am convinced that I could never speak or act in a racist way. Maybe as someone who believes herself to be highly ethical, I don't see when I do something dishonest or calculating.

My deep desire to be "good," to be on the side of the angels, may lead me to demonize anyone who disagrees with me. If it becomes existentially important that I am always on the side of righteousness and justice, then those who have different views have to be over there, on the wrong side, the bad side, the mistaken side. I fear I used to be like this, in my younger days; those who disagreed with me were "fascists" (in fact, I had to reassure my mother at one point that no, I did not consider her and my dad fascists).

I now make it a practice, each year, to find at least one newspaper column by Jeff Jacoby that I agree with. Jacoby is a right-wing columnist in the Boston Globe with whom I disagree 99% of the time, usually vehemently. But once or twice a year I find myself agreeing with most or all of what he has to say. This is very reassuring to me. The fact that

he periodically expresses an opinion that I agree with lets me know that neither he nor I are stuck in a predetermined boxes; we are not always on opposing sides of "right" and "wrong."

It is also possible to become wedded to a story of our own inadequacy. Sometimes our story of self is that we are weak and powerless and always at the mercy of others. Sometimes our story is that we are incapable of change, that our weaknesses are so great that we lack the will or ability to overcome them. We may constantly berate ourselves, disappoint ourselves, see only the ways in which we screw up, hurt other people, fail to achieve.

This is not a helpful sense of self, because for all of our self-criticism, true *teshuvah*, real change, becomes impossible. It's a funny version of selfishness, in which we allow our perceived limitations to keep us from becoming something more, someone who could actually do real good for ourselves and others.

These stories of self, especially stories of the "good self" or the "bad self," are obstacles to change. So what is the alternative? Is it to aspire to become "nothing," in the Buddhist or mystical sense, to seek to erase any sense of self? And is that even possible?

As I was doing some research for this talk, I found some lovely teachings about self and non-self on the website of the Lubavitcher Hasidim. This teaching comes from Rabbi Tzvi Freedman, based on a teaching of the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson:

The point is not to be a nothing.
God created you to be a something.
But not a something because you are something.
A something because your purpose is everything.

This teaching points us in a good direction for the new year. It invites us to think of ourselves not as an amalgam of likes and dislikes, of opinions and habits, but as something else, something greater - a "something whose purpose is everything." There is another Hasidic teaching that each of us is here on this earth because we have some task to do, some repair to make in this broken world. If our gift was not needed, then we wouldn't have been born. Our simple existence proves our worth. But it's not enough that we're here; our task is to figure out how we are meant to serve.

Here is a related teaching from the Rebbe:

The truly humble person is not one who feels worthless or inferior.
True smallness is what happens when a person stops thinking, "What will be with me?" and instead thinks, "What is needed of me right now?"

This, then, is the work of *teshuvah*, of returning to that purpose for which we were created: to ask, in each moment, "What is needed of me right now?" Each moment is

different, and what is asked of me in any moment will change. This is why I cannot become stuck in my story of self, because I'll be responding to that question from a place of habit, from the perspective of yesterday's need.

In my experience, the only way I can truly discern what is asked of me in any given moment is to get out of my own way. I need to move my ego over, to let go of my need to be right; to excuse the part of myself that thinks it has all the answers. Instead I empty myself out in an attempt to become a vessel - a vessel for Godliness, a vessel for truth, a vessel for that purpose which is mine but which I don't yet know. In those moments, when I can open in that way, I find that the answer arises: this is what is needed - the word, the action, the thought.

This question, "What is needed of me right now?" should not become yet another source of worry and stress; it's not about adding one more item to our endless to do list: "Answer email, pick up the kids, make dinner, figure out why I am on this planet..." I think the teaching here is suggesting a stance, an orientation towards the world. It's asking us to to not worry so much, to let go of our focus on--in the Rebbe's words--"What will be with me?" This, of course, is fairly counter-cultural. We are encouraged in every moment to think about how we're doing, and to worry about what we have and don't have.

I have noticed, this past year, that for every commercial transaction that engage in - buying a piece of furniture, taking a plane ride, going to a restaurant - every single experience is followed up by a survey to determine what I thought of the experience. It makes me insane. I just want to park my car near the airport; do I really need a follow-up questionnaire? Is what I like and don't like really that important, in the greater scheme of things?

This consumer orientation contributes to my small sense of self. It is the self defined by my likes and dislikes. This is the constructed self, the self that gets in the way of becoming who I am meant to be. When I ask instead, "what is needed of me right now?" I get oriented in another direction. I am reminded that there is something beyond myself. If I am needed, it is in service to others - to my family or community, to my society, to the planet. And this question reminds me that I have something to give. Instead of focusing on what I have and don't have, what I like and dislike, it asks me to think about the gifts that I have to offer.

Maybe those gifts are very simple: a word of support to a friend. A meal offered to someone who is sick or lonely. A hug to someone who is sad. Maybe what is asked of me is something significant: to give away a lot of money. To step up to a responsibility that I am uniquely suited for. To drop my defenses and become an ally to someone who is different than me. Sometimes what is needed of me is that I take care of myself; that I put on my own oxygen mask before attempting to care for others. Sometimes what is asked of me is to get out of the way, to stop thinking that I need to do for others, and let them do for themselves.

In thinking about what we each have to offer, our "purpose which is everything," we can celebrate that which makes each of us unique--the experiences and perspectives we carry that shape our particular work of repair. This is where we can affirm all those aspects of ourselves that the wider world is often unable to celebrate: our gender identity, our sexuality, our racial and ethnic heritage, the uniqueness of our bodies and our minds. It is often precisely from those places where we have been hurt that we discover the gift we have to offer.

It's not easy, answering this question, "what is needed of me right now?" It's a wonderful challenge, as we step into the new year, to take on this intention of becoming holy vessels, open to the purpose for which we were put on this earth. Over these next ten days, we can take the opportunity to think about what needs to be cleared away, what in our lives is contributing to a limited sense of self. We can, in the silences, drop this question, "What is needed of me right now?" and then not think too much about it, and see what arises. We can experiment with letting go of some aspect of ourselves that we've been convinced is essential to who we are, but maybe isn't so essential after all.

May we experience liberation, in the new year, from our small sense of self, and be open to hearing whatever messages the universe may have for us. May we allow ourselves to be written in the book of life in new and dazzling ways. May we each be like the shofar--an open, strong, holy vessel for the spirit that blows through each of us, bringing some much-needed message into the world.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu!

*Rabbi Toba Spitzer
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