

Coming Closer

Yom Kippur 5768 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, the great medieval philosopher (also known as Maimonides), taught:

“*Teshuvah* is great because it draws a person close to the *Shechina*...as the prophet Jeremiah states, ‘If you will turn/return (*tashuv*), Israel’ declares Adonai, ‘to Me you will return.’”
Maimonides concludes, “*Teshuvah* brings close those who are far off.” (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:6)

This teaching from Maimonides comes in his great legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, in the Laws of *Teshuvah*. I find this particular “law” intriguing because it comes after a series of much more tangible, specific instructions about what *teshuvah* is. For the most part, Maimonides talks about *teshuvah* as a process of deep behavior modification—identifying what it is we are doing wrong, and then working to erase that wrong from both our thoughts and our actions to the furthest extent possible. *Teshuvah* involves regret, confession, inner resolve, and ultimately the ability to refrain from negative behavior that one has engaged in in the past.

But in this mishnah, Maimonides seems to be dealing with *teshuvah* on an entirely different level. Let me read it again:

“*Teshuvah* is great because it draws a person close to the *Shechina*...as the prophet Jeremiah states, ‘If you will turn/return (*tashuv*), Israel’ declares Adonai, ‘to Me you will return.’”
Teshuvah brings close those who are far off.”

The first model of *teshuvah* that Maimonides deals with is *teshuvah* as “repentance” in the way it’s most commonly understood—regretting and then reforming our thoughts and our deeds. But in this last teaching, *teshuvah* has a meaning closer to the literal meaning of the word. *Lashuv* is to turn, or perhaps to return. Here, it is a turning closer to something, a turning that brings one close. Close to what? In Maimonides phrase, the *Shechinah*.

I do not entirely know what Maimonides intended by his use of this name for God, the *Shechina*. In the earlier rabbinic literature that Maimonides drew on for his own code of law, the phrase *Shechina* refers to the aspect of God that is closest to human beings; it is God’s presence on earth. *Shechina* is the aspect of God, according to the rabbis, that suffers with us, that goes into exile with us, that comforts us beneath her wings. *Shechina* doesn’t judge or give laws, is never described as harsh or angry, as God is described in other settings. *Shechina* is always accessible, if we know where to look for her. *Shechinah* could be described as the Godliness that permeates our own experience, the experience of both loss and comfort, of exile and of home.

So I would like to explore with you this notion of “being brought close to *Shechinah*” not as a process of being brought close to God in the usual sense, but as being brought close to the fundamental Reality—capital R—of our own experience.

So this would be my new reading of Maimonides: “Great is *teshuvah*, for it brings a person close to the fundamental Reality of his/her own experience.”

That may sound strange. Aren't we always close to the reality of our own experience? Isn't that what living is? What's there to "return" to? And where's the potential for Godliness in that?

But this is the great insight here. If we sit and observe our own minds and hearts, we learn that we actually don't spend much time at all in even the general vicinity of our own experience. We spend inordinate amounts of time anywhere but.

As I know from many silent retreats sitting and observing my own thoughts, the mind has a funny tendency to want to be anywhere but here. A huge proportion of the mental energy of my usual waking hours is spent either remembering things from the past, planning for the future, or imagining things that might be but aren't. If I feel a strange pain in my stomach, I begin wondering about the various exotic diseases that perhaps I'm harboring. When I've had an upsetting interaction with someone, I have long, extended conversations with them in my mind, actually getting angry at words that I am making up and putting in their imaginary mouth. I dream about things I don't have but want, I worry about what I'm going to do tomorrow, I make endless lists and plans. And I would suspect that I'm not radically different in all that from most of you here.

None of those particular things are wrong, per se—it's okay to have memories, to plan, to dream. We really can't stop doing those things even if we wanted to, and I'm not sure we'd want to. But being far from the Reality of our actual experience can also bring great suffering. Because this is the life we have, right here, whatever is going on, for better and for worse. Memories, dreams, plans—they can give momentary comfort or entertainment, but they're not a place you can live. We can only live here, in this moment, in this life.

I'd like to share with you a teaching that a friend sent me recently. It's from an Elul reflection by Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses, which she recently shared with other members of her congregation in New York. Rabbi Cohler-Esses writes:

"I used to think that one day I could be perfect. In fact, one of my early memories is of bowling as a small girl and believing that God wanted me to bowl perfectly. To me failing the game was failing God. In later years I realized that my childish idea of perfection was woefully superficial. Nevertheless, I continued in this quest for perfection for many, many years (not as a bowler - but in other areas of my life).

"This quest for perfection occupied my heart, until relatively recently. In the past few years my family and I were thrust on a radically different journey, one that led in the opposite direction of perfection..."

Cohler-Esses goes on to talk about her children, telling us that two of them have learning disabilities, and that one son in particular has "significant developmental disabilities." She continues:

"One of the things I realized in this painful journey of discovering the nature of my children's struggles was that perfection was out of the question, once and for all. It would never happen for

my family. Our imperfections are quite visible. I cannot any longer even begin to pretend.

“As a result a central preoccupation – of either being or seeming perfect--- was taken from me. A profound shift began to occur in my life. A shift from the aspiration to perfection, the pretense of being “together,” to experiencing myself as living as one who is broken, permanently broken.

“But, and here was the surprise, the gift in all of this -- a tremendous burden is lifting. Living as broken I no longer needed to pretend and hope for something that wasn’t possible. I no longer needed to ground my life in a false identity. Paradoxically, it was in this very brokenness that I began to experience, not perfection, but wholeness. I also began to understand that despite my children’s imperfections, they are, in a profound way, perfect and whole, precisely as they are. Amidst the fragments, wholeness emerges.”

There are many ways to understand and appreciate this teaching, including questioning the whole notion of “perfection” and the often impossible standards we set for ourselves and for others. But what I found profoundly moving and helpful in Cohler-Esses’ story is the way in which she was able—or perhaps was forced—to come close to the reality of her own experience, and in that coming close, found healing and wholeness. I am sure her life is not objectively any easier than it was before, but as she describes in her own words, a burden has lifted. She is no longer living a life that isn’t real, that isn’t hers.

One of my teachers, Sylvia Boorstein, once said that we suffer when we are in contention with our own lives. And we so often are precisely that—in contention with our own lives. When we experience the reality of this moment as unpleasant or difficult, we tend to want it to be otherwise. In that wanting, we move away from our own experience, and we suffer. This movement “away,” the opposite of the being “brought close” that I discussed earlier, can take a variety of forms. It can be the impulse to fix, to find a solution—the jump from what is to what should be, and the preoccupation then of figuring out how to make the “should be” into what is. We can experience disappointment—the great, painful gap between what we want or expect and what actually is. We can experience a variety of aversive feelings. Anxiety and anger are often at the top of the list. We get angry that things aren’t going the way we want; we feel anxious wondering if things will be this way forever. It can manifest as a bodily sensation—a constriction of breath, of the belly—that usually mirrors a kind of constriction of the mind. We get very tight when we don’t like what is happening in the present moment. And in that constriction, there’s often very little room to maneuver—very little room to consider the real options, to make wise choices. The truth is, we can make ourselves a little crazy.

And I’m not just talking here about the big unpleasant and difficult things in our lives—dealing with illness or significant loss. I’m talking about the little unpleasant and difficult things that we come across in the normal course of any day. The extremely slow driver in front of us. The person talking loudly on their cellphone in the restaurant. The rain on the day of our outdoor party. The wet newspaper, a misplaced wallet, someone else’s hair in the shower drain.

This summer I went on an 8-day silent retreat. It was a difficult retreat. For some reason I was barely sleeping, and on the second or third day I began not feeling well, and for a day or so I felt nauseous and barely ate. On the fourth day I felt better when I woke up, and I was really looking

forward to lunch (on a retreat where you basically just alternate sitting and walking in silence, meals become a very big deal!). Lunch time came, and I got my food, and went out to sit at a table outdoors. I was prepared to have a magnificent experience. The sun was shining, it was a gorgeous day. I was going to eat slowly and mindfully, experiencing marvelous tastes and sensations as I had on many retreats past. I would revel in the silence and sounds of nature.

After I had taken a few bites, another retreat participant sat down opposite me at the picnic table. He proceeded to pick up an apple, and take a bite. It was the loudest sound I had ever heard. He took another bite. I felt like I was in a special-effects studio—there was no way a normal human mouth could make that much noise biting into an apple. I tried to return my awareness to my own eating, but then he took another ear-splitting bite.

I now abandoned hope of my perfect retreat meal. I began calculating how many bites a person could take of the outside of an apple, because I figured it was those outside, through-the-skin bites that had the most sound value. He had already taken three. I calculated there couldn't be more than another three or so. I would wait patiently for him to finish, and then resume my meal.

One, Two. Three. Each as loud as the last. And they kept going. It seemed this man had discovered the Moebius strip of apples, an apple with an endless surface. I don't know how it was physically possible, but the crunching went on for at least another 10 minutes. He ate every last bite of that apple, and every bite had the sonic quality of a car crash to my ears.

Of course, by now you're wondering why I didn't just get up and move. That thought did cross my mind, but it just ignited a whole other chain reaction of unease. Wouldn't it be obvious to this man, if I just took my plate and left, that I was disgusted with the noise he was making? I didn't want to hurt his feelings. And what about my mindfulness practice—shouldn't I be able to overcome this mild annoyance and achieve a state of calm acceptance? I was a total failure as a meditator if I got up and left. Besides, I loved this spot. I was here first. He was the one who wasn't being mindful, wasn't paying attention to the effect of his actions on others, wasn't really eating that apple in a very meditative way. I wasn't going to move.

Even in the moment I sort of had a sense of humor about the whole thing, but I really was very disappointed and sad that my meal had been ruined.

But here is where the teaching is. My meal hadn't actually been ruined, just my fantasy of what my meal was going to be. I have absolutely no idea, if the apple man hadn't been there, what would have happened. Maybe I would have been distracted. Maybe the taste of the food wouldn't have been so marvelous. Maybe I would have spilled my plate all over myself. Or maybe it would have been the most profound experience of eating I'd ever had in my life. But all of those are just imagined possibilities. The only meal I actually had was this one: sitting at a table in the sunshine, across from a man eating an apple. The actual experience was mildly unpleasant, but my own frantic desire for it to be other than what it is was, was what really made me miserable. I couldn't really taste my food or enjoy the summer air because I was so preoccupied figuring out how and when this unpleasantness would end.

If we sit and watch our own reactions closely enough, we can become aware of that moment of pulling away, the pull away from the actual experience that leads to the misery and suffering. There's often a bit of panic in that motion. What happened when I heard that first thundering "crunch"? It wasn't, objectively, that bad a sound. It was just a sound, and theoretically I could have treated it like the sound of a bird or a passing car or distant thunder. Perhaps the first crunch was mildly disturbing, but I could have let it go. But once the second crunch happened, my mind geared up. Now I jumped into the future—when is this ever going to stop? My meal is ruined, or my meal will be ruined if this doesn't end. I was now comparing something that never was—my imagined perfect meal—to something that hadn't happened yet. I was about as far as I could get from the full reality of the moment—sitting at a picnic table on a sunny day, a plate of food in front of me, a somewhat noisy apple eater across from me. I never got to discover what that moment actually held—and every moment is so full, holds so so much, if we can only be present to it.

This is sort of a small and not too serious example. But I think it's a good example of what we do every single day, over and over again. Our habitual movement away from our own experience sends us off in directions that only compound our suffering. We spend enormous amounts of energy in this endeavor—planning, fixing, justifying, arguing, complaining. Sometimes it's all in our heads. Sometimes we take it out on the people around us. And it's not because I, or you, are neurotic or crazy or obsessive. It's just the daily challenge of *teshuvah*, of coming close to the Reality of our own experience.

The good news is, we can actually do something about it. We can learn new patterns, and ease some of the suffering that we cause ourselves. And the really good news is that what works for the little things, like the apple man, also works for the big things. With enough practice, enough discernment, enough commitment, we can actually change the way we experience very profound challenges—like serious illness, loss of a job or a relationship, even death. We can learn to sit very close, indeed, to all kinds of experiences.

In Jewish tradition, this quality of mind is called *hishtavut*. It comes from the root *shaveh*, "equal," and is often translated as "equanimity." I had a bad reaction the first time I learned about this quality. The word "equanimity" conjures up for me the image of a person who has no emotions, who sort of glides through life and isn't bothered by anything because they don't really feel anything. Some of the examples I heard of what it meant to have this quality of *hishtavut* involved allowing oneself to be humiliated, to show that one could accept equally all that life hands out. I thought, maybe some of those male rabbis could use a little humiliation, it was good for them, but what about those of us who are already disempowered? Why in the world should we cultivate that? And sometimes this quality of *hishtavut* is described in Jewish texts as a kind of super-human restraint, a pulling back on natural reactions and emotions for the sake of self-control.

But I think I have a deeper understanding of *hishtavut* now, and it's really not about restraint, self-control or self-denial. It's rooted instead in that quality of equal-ness. I understand it as meaning that we need to be able to sit equally close to all of the experiences of our lives, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the joyful and the difficult—because those experiences are our life. If we are not close, then we are someplace that doesn't really exist, and we will suffer. The

ability to remain close to what actually is does not mean to have no emotions, to not feel pain or joy. Quite the opposite. Instead of masking our true emotions with anxiety or anger, we will be able to experience the full reality of this moment, with all of its attendant emotions. And most moments are complicated. Often we are asked to hold seemingly contradictory feelings in the same moment. This is, I think, what Rabbi Cohler-Esses was describing when she spoke of experiencing wholeness in the midst of brokenness. Sitting close to the truth of her experience, she was able to hold both wholeness and brokenness in her heart, and this has made her life eminently more livable.

There is a very radical statement in our prayerbook, a blessing that is said every day as part of the morning service—something that we chanted just this morning. The *Yotzer* blessing, the first blessing before the Shema, begins: *Baruch atah...yotzer or u'vorey choshech, oseh shalom u'vorey et ha-kol*. Blessed are You, Adonai, Source of Life, who creates light and dark, who makes peace and creates everything.

Everything. *Ha-kol*. All of it.

The radical claim of Biblical and then rabbinic Judaism is that there is, ultimately, one Source of all. Whatever that Source is, however we understand it, it is to be found in every aspect of existence. The pleasant and the unpleasant, the joyful and the painful. I can't have the exquisite taste of really good chocolate without the ability to feel excruciating pain. I can't experience the transformative power of love without the reality of also feeling the depths of loss. This is just the wonderful, perplexing reality of being a highly evolved, sentient carbon-based life form.

I can try, of course, to convince myself otherwise. I can struggle mightily against the difficult, try to rid my life of it, do everything in my power to avoid pain and loss and sorrow. But then I'm not really living. And it's impossible to do, anyway.

You can think for a moment, for yourself, about the energy you spend in your life trying to move away from, to avoid, to cover up, the difficult. The ways you guard against possible disappointment. The stories you make up to explain things in such a way that you won't feel quite so bad. The energy consumed in endlessly wanting what you don't have, trying to make things different than they are, trying to make other people different than they are (a notably futile and frustrating task).

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his own commentary on Maimonides' teaching about *teshuvah* and "coming close," defines "sin" as that which creates distance between a person and God. To put this in slightly more Reconstructionist terms: If we understand God as the underlying Source of all that is, the underlying Reality of our experience, then "sin," the Hebrew word *cheyt*, is that which takes us far from that Reality, that separates us in some fundamental way from the Godliness that is in us and surrounds us.

But we could also shift it slightly, and say: all of these *chata'im*, these transgressions, all of the things that we recite in the Yom Kippur confession—speaking untruth, misuse of food and drink, expressing contempt, violent impulses, misuse of money, condescension, hatred, unwillingness to change, stubbornness, deceiving ourselves and others—all of these things occur when we are unable to sit close to the reality of ourselves and our lives. In the frustration of our

disappointment, in the pain of our loss, in the gap we experience between our lives as we think they should be and our lives as they are—into that space comes fear, hatred, anger, despair. And out of fear, hatred, anger and despair come hurtful words and actions, deception, arrogance, even violence.

Soloveitchik speaks of *teshuvah* as re-establishing intimacy with God. If God is, indeed, within everything—without exception—then the challenge of *teshuvah* is to become intimate with everything—with all of our experience, without exception. My meditation teacher this summer, Christina Feldman, speaks of achieving intimacy with our “demons,” with the difficult things in our lives. She says: “We are hostage to everything in our life that we don’t have a dialogue with, because then there is no relationship, so there is no possibility for understanding.” We know how painful it is when we are cut off from important relationships in our lives, when we stop speaking to someone who once played a big role. How much damage do we do when we are cut off from entire aspects of our own lives, when we have no dialogue with a part of ourselves? But too often that is precisely what we do—we hide from, we avoid, we push away those things that we find unpleasant and difficult.

The practice of intimacy, *hishtavut*, *teshuvah*, begins with the practice of mindfulness. We spend so much time far away from where we actually are because we don’t usually realize where we actually are. I think I’m here talking to you but my mind is somewhere else. I’m eating my lunch but staring at my computer screen—am I really eating? I’m hiking in the woods but I’m talking on my cell phone—where am I? I’m sitting in school but wishing I was somewhere else—what is actually happening? The practice of mindfulness is simply the ongoing commitment and attempt to just be where I am, and to be aware of what’s going on in my own body and mind. I am standing on a stage in a room full of people. The air is cool. There are some unpleasant sensations in my back. I am speaking from my heart. I’m feeling a bit hungry. I’m feeling alternately nervous and good.

These are all realities of this moment. When I am present to them, I myself am more fully here. And when I’m fully present, I tend to be calmer, and truer, and wiser, than when I’m not fully present. I am less likely to hurt someone else, to hurt myself. I have a bit more patience, and am better able to choose what to do next, how to best respond to whatever arises. When I am fully present, my heart tends to be more open, I can more easily access joy and more easily feel empathy for someone else.

I want to offer one last teaching around this whole notion of “coming close.” It is very easy to be judgmental of our own aversion. We can get stuck when we know we’re having an unhealthy response and then have an aversive reaction to our own aversion. Think about a time when you did or said something you didn’t feel good about—when that happens to me, I feel a physical sensation, a kind of cringe, and I either end up beating up on myself or finding some way to blame someone else for my action.

In such moments, there is one very helpful response, and that is compassion. We spend these holidays, over and over again, invoking the Godly quality of compassion, *rachamim*. We sing, many times over, a verse from the Torah where God reveals Godself to Moses, and in that revelation lists 13 qualities of compassion: *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun*... In the Torah story, this is the moment where Moses and God are re-establishing intimacy after the horrible

breakdown of relationship when the Israelites worship the golden calf. It is through this pronouncement of compassion that God is able to come back into relationship with Moses, and vice versa. This is a beautiful metaphor for our own attempt to reconnect to the Godliness of our own experience, to establish intimacy with what is.

What this means, in practice, is that when I feel aversion rising in myself—anger, frustration, that visceral pull away—when I feel this, I just try to direct compassion at that feeling. I try to neither judge it nor justify it, but just be compassionate towards it. Compassion is an opening, and it can soften and sometimes dissolve the constriction that accompanies aversion. It can head off the escalation into suffering, and help me return to a calmer, more centered place.

So if you're really disappointed about something in your life, don't deny or defend your disappointment—just be as compassionate as you can with it. If you are feeling fear, or sorrow, or confusion—send a little *rachamim* in their direction. The quality of compassion is enormously powerful—according to the language of the Torah, it contains God's very essence. But you don't have to believe in God, or take my word for it. Just try it.

My wish and prayer for all of us is that we learn to do *teshuvah*, to come a little closer, to be brought close—to our own true selves, to the Godliness of our experience, to this moment. Right here.