

The Holy Work of Repair: Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775

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Moshe was dying. He was very old. Very, very old – no one knew exactly what his real age was. One hundred years? More? His official papers, his many passports, his countless ID cards in countless languages... showed an imaginary date of birth that a Polish police office with an overly humorous sense of humor had inscribed on a useless paper...

He had no illness, he was simply dying of old age... Golda, his wife, was seated on the edge of the bed... she was trying to imagine what life was going to be, might be and become, without Moshe... They had lived more than seventy years together – how could she think of life differently?

...Moshe spoke little, but he did speak. “Tell me, Golda, do you remember the horrible pogrom in our village in 1905?” “Of course, I remember it. But why are you tormenting yourself with this? It happened so long ago... we are no longer in Ukraine, we are in France. There are no more Cossacks. We live in peace.”

“Tell me, Golda, were you with me then?” Tears come to Golda’s eyes. “Of course, I was with you.”

[Moshe continues to ask Golda if she was with him at difficult moments in his life: when the Bolsheviks came to conscript him in 1918; when they were confined to the Lemberg ghetto in 1942; when they were in the concentration camp at Maidanek; when the Communists deported them after the war; when they were almost killed in the shooting at a restaurant in Paris. “Were you with me?” Moshe asks.]

“Yes, my love, my Moshe, I was there... there too I was with you. I’ve always been with you, always.”

Beads of sweat begin to form on Moshe’s forehead. He is quiet and contemplates the ceiling. There’s a deep silence, as if all of a sudden Moshe has found peace, calm, and serenity. He gives a long look to Golda and finally tells her in a low, matter-of-fact voice: “You see, Golda, I think you were bad luck.”¹

If only it were so easy to understand all the hardship, and all the heartache in this world.

We come here, on the eve of a New Year, and look back on a year riddled with pain. This year, thanks to the front page of a newspaper, I had to explain beheadings to my older daughter. This year, we have seen the outbreak of Ebola in Africa, an epidemic which rages on. This year, we witnessed the war in Israel and Gaza, about which I will speak tomorrow morning. Airplanes downed and disappeared; chaos in the Ukraine; civil war in Syria; the list goes on.

I am reminded of a New Yorker cartoon showing two people walking down the street. One says to the other: “I’m starting to wonder if my story is ever going to be uplifting.”

And yes, shanah tovah.

¹ Adapted from Adam Biro, *Two Jews on a Train* (Chicago, 2001; originally published in 1998 in French), pp.102-106.

Almost two thousand years ago, there was a great debate between two rabbinic schools, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. “For two and a half years,” we read in the Talmud (Eruvin 13b), “[they] debated the following question. [The House of Shammai] said, ‘It would have been more pleasant for a person not to have been created than to have been created.’ And [the House of Hillel] would say, ‘It is more pleasant for a person to have been created than had he not been created.’” Finally, after two and a half years, they took a vote. Their decision? It would have been more pleasant not to have been created. But, they say, “now that [we] have been created, let [us] search our deeds” (BT Eruvin 13b). In other words, now that we are here, we should pay attention to what we do.

You have to wonder what happened over those two and a half years that led the House of Hillel to agree with the House of Shammai. Their schools developed in the tumultuous time spanning the beginning of the common era: the time in which Jesus inspired his followers in opposition to the world as it was, and the time in which the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, in response to the Jewish revolt. It was a creative time, but not an easy one.

But something else interesting happened all those years ago. For the first time in our history, the phrase “*tikkun olam*” appeared.² It comes in the *aleyenu* prayer, with which we now end every service, but which originally was only said at this time of year, on Rosh Hashanah. *L’taken olam b’malchut shaddai* – to fix the world under the rule of God. This seems to have more to do with God than with us; but a human being wrote that prayer thinking that the world was not as it should be, and hoping – believing – that it would change.

A few hundred years after that, the idea evolved. The rabbis of the midrash used it to institute laws which they thought would repair the world in a more modest, tangible way. For them, *tikkun olam* was about fixing flaws in their legal system to ensure good outcomes. It was a way of looking at the system as a whole and making sure it did what it was meant to do: create and sustain a stable society, and protect those who were most vulnerable.

A thousand years later, give or take, the idea changed yet again, this time, radically. It was the 16th century. A significant part of the Jewish world had been caught up in the cataclysm of the Inquisition, and the expulsion from Spain. The Golden Age of co-existence, the *Convivencia*, as it was called, had ended in disaster, with thousands upon thousands of Jews on their way into exile.

From this disaster, a new idea of *tikkun olam* was born, this time from Isaac Luria and his community in the north of the land of Israel, up in the mountains of Safed. According to Luria, the world began with a cosmic accident. God intended to share God’s light with the world by containing it in vessels, but the vessels shattered, spreading sparks of divinity and shards of evil everywhere. In other words, even the very first New Year would have left rabbis struggling to give insights on contemporary catastrophic events. But from *this* catastrophe – the exile of Spanish Jewry, transposed by Luria onto the very origins of the world – came the possibility of repair. For Luria and his followers, *tikkun olam* was the redemptive idea that human actions could help fix what was broken. It began with the acknowledgment that the world was deeply flawed, and went on to insist that *mitzvah* by *mitzvah*, act by act, what was broken could be made whole.

² For the history of the term “*tikkun olam*,” I am indebted to Rabbi Jill Jacobs, who covers the topic in her book, *There Shall Be No Needy* (Woodstock, VT, 2009).

And then, just over a hundred years ago, the idea shifted one more time. As the Reform movement began to define itself, we integrated the notion of repairing the world into our mission as Jews. Although it took a little longer to use the Hebrew phrase, the meaning was clear. Back in 1885 – three short years after our Temple was formed – the fathers of the Reform movement declared: “we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”³ In other words: fixing the world.

Here is where the history lesson ends, and our story begins. I want to share with you two very different moments from this past year that were redemptive moments; two moments, as I see them, of tikkun olam.

The first took place in Chicago in the spring. I was at a Reform rabbinic convention, that entity almost impossible to conceive of in Montreal, when hundreds of Reform rabbis gather together for learning and connection. As a side note on a different kind of tikkun, I have to share with you a snippet of my conversation with Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained by the American Reform movement over forty years ago. I asked her, “What do you tell people when they say they didn’t know women could be rabbis?” She smiled. “I say to them, you don’t get out much, do you?”

But of everything that happened over those days, here is the image I want to share with you: a stage full of rabbis, shaving their heads to raise money for cancer research. It was the culmination of a project called “36 Rabbis Shave for the Brave.” All because of one little boy, the son of two colleagues, Rabbis Phyllis and Michael Sommer, who is now “forever eight” – having died last year of cancer. His name was Sammy Sommer, and they called him Superman Sam. I don’t want to be presumptuous by pretending that I knew him. I never had the opportunity. I know his parents through overlapping circles, and by reading what they have written, through Sammy’s illness, and now, after his death.

Here is what happened that night: Sammy’s parents and many other rabbis sat in the middle of the stage, surrounded by friends, holding hands. Garbage bags under their feet to catch all the hair. What happened that night raised over 600,000 dollars for research into childhood cancers.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer, Sammy’s mom, wrote:

With Sammy's death, it has given me a purpose and focus to my desire to give this all meaning. I don't want to hear that any of this terrible stuff happened for a reason, I really don't. And I do believe that I have a responsibility to make something happen because of it. (Which is far from the same thing.)...

There are so many ways to help kids with cancer... But if I'm being totally honest here, I know that there's only one thing that I can do to have real, lasting impact, and that's to raise money for research... By funding research, I know that I am putting my heart and soul into my own private goal of a day when no other parent will hear what we heard: "there's no more that we can do for your child."⁴

³ The Pittsburgh Platform, available at http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pittsburgh_program.html. For more context for the Reform movement, see also <http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/what-reform-judaism>, and for social justice efforts in particular, see www.rac.org.

There is no reason in the world one can give for this loss. But, in Phyllis's words, "I do believe I have a responsibility to make something happen because of it."

The impetus to act, in the face of unspeakable loss – that willingness goes hand in hand with the insistence that life is worth living. It brings us back to Hillel and Shammai's debate. To be a created being, vulnerable to such pain, is anything but pleasant. But would we choose anything else? In reflecting on her son Sammy's bris, at the very beginning of his life, Phyllis writes:

It is a blur in my memory, a day that seems so long ago.
I know that we said things like "you are the embodiment of your parents' hopes and dreams, you are the future realized." I know that we said something like that because that's what we say at all of these events. I know that we meant it. I know that we were so grateful for a healthy baby, that we knew damn well how things can go wrong.
What would we have done differently if we had known....? It is impossible to answer.
At that moment, I know that I never imagined what was to come.
If you had told me, I would not have believed you.
And if you had given me the chance to give it all up, to have never known Sam in order to spare us all this heartbreak....I would not take it... I would not take it back.⁵

To look the worst kind of suffering in the face and still to act to make the world better for the next family, the next child; to insist that despite it all, it was worth it, that it is better to live and to love: *that* is tikkun, the refusal to be paralyzed, the passion for life, the insistence to respond.

But it doesn't need to be that dramatic.

Which brings me to the other moment of tikkun: Just over two weeks ago, we broke ground for the ramp by which many of you entered our Temple tonight. Until tonight, every time someone with a wheelchair or a walker wanted to enter this holy space, they had to come in through the kitchen. As much as I love our danish, the kitchen is not the most dignified entrance.

Interestingly, back in Biblical days, there was supposed to be a ramp instead of steps leading to the altar. Rabbi Avi Weiss gives three reasons for this, two ancient and one very modern.⁶ First, he writes, "In the ancient Near East, nudity was associated with ritual activity. This link is rejected by Torah." In other words, you don't want to be able to see up the priest's robes. Then, he suggests that "ramps imply perpetual movement, whereas steps can offer rest." In spiritual life, Rabbi Weiss tells us, there can be no standing still.

Finally, Rabbi Weiss adds a contemporary approach:

The presence of ramps can be viewed as a symbol of accessibility. Once there is accessibility in the place of the spirit, either in the altar or in today's synagogue, it sends a message that all places should be open... they also send [the message] to one and all, even to those not in wheelchairs, that everyone, regardless of affiliation, health or station in life is welcome... For me, the ramps to the altar powerfully remind us what makes a synagogue beautiful... To those who feel themselves far removed from the issue and

4 <http://supermansamuel.blogspot.ca/2014/03/hair-today.html>. I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Phyllis Sommer and Rabbi Michael Sommer, who have encouraged other rabbis to share their son's story to help make change.

5 <http://supermansamuel.blogspot.ca/2014/05/going-back.html>.

6 Rabbi Avi Weiss, "The Lessons of the Ramps to the Altar," *Sun Sentinel*, Feb. 7, 2012.

believe it has nothing to do with them, let it be said that none of us are immune from the misfortunes that befall others. There is no such thing as the sick and the well. There are only the sick and the not yet sick.

A photograph in my office says it all. It is of a man sitting in his wheelchair at the bottom of a flight of steps, leading up to the entrance of the synagogue. Over its door, is emblazoned the sentence, "Open the gates of righteousness for me, I will enter through them." (Psalm 118:19)

The man sits with his back to the doors, unable to enter. As a Jewish community we have failed him. Our task is to learn from the ramps that led to the altar in the tabernacle. They teach that we must make sure that this man can face the door and be welcomed as he makes his way in.

And perhaps that insight is not so new after all. Rashi, the great medieval commentator, writes:

The Torah commands that stones, which have no awareness of being treated with scorn, must not be treated that way because they fulfill a need for us. Your fellow human being, who is in the image of your Creator and does care whether you treat him scornfully – how much the more must you be careful not to do so. (Rashi on Exodus 20:23)⁷

I believe that our ramp is a spark of goodness, in a world still full of evil. In a year when we saw concrete used to build tunnels in Gaza to launch attacks upon Israeli civilians, we used concrete to build a ramp. The same materials: but such different decisions, and such different results. For us, of course, the context is completely different, and the choices not nearly as stark. But I am proud that we decided to direct our resources towards making this ramp the first tangible result of our campaign. We speak about open doors, about inclusivity and welcome; this ramp shows that we mean it.

“It would be more pleasant,” the Houses of Hillel and Shammai agreed, “had we not been created.” More pleasant, maybe; easier, perhaps; but better, no. For here we are, able to pay attention to what we do. Here we are, able to heal our world, piece by painstaking piece.

Let there be no mistake. This work of repair can be painstaking, and it can be thankless, and it can be slow. Just ask our people who worked to get the permit for the ramp from Westmount City Hall!⁸ But in a deeper sense, we are changing not just bricks and mortar, but also hearts and minds. Even as we are working on physical accessibility, we are working on inclusivity for people with special needs. A group of dedicated congregants have formed a Special Needs Working Group that received a grant to hire a coordinator, to help us get it right. Our Torah school just started up for the fall, under Rabbi Greenspan’s excellent guidance, and one of our parents, who is active in the working group, reached out to me soon after the first family service. She wrote:

I was looking around at the family service and all the beautiful children, especially a little girl snuggling with a boy and an even littler girl. I thought how nice it was for them to

⁷ Beyond the purposes of this sermon, it is also worth looking at Ibn Ezra on the same verse.

⁸ For this and so much more, special thanks to the team at Rubin & Rotman Associates, including our own Stephen Rotman and Gem Silver, alongside our President, Stephen Yaffe, our Campaign Director, Frank Weinstein, and our Executive Director, Shellie Ettinger, for their unwavering efforts to have our ramp ready for Rosh Hashanah.

have that cosy time together and to get a good feeling for the service. Then the sweet little girl turned around and told my son, who was singing the prayer (correctly, I might add), to be quiet. Then my son started talking to himself and writing with his finger.

The little girl looked at her friends and made the finger sign for crazy about my son. I am not sure if he noticed or not.

...I don't know how to help the children be more compassionate and be enriched by people who are different, but that is the goal.⁹

There is so much that needs healing. But our tradition teaches that that is precisely why we are here and why our existence is worthwhile: to be God's hands in this world.

Because here's the thing: inherent in the idea of tikkun olam is that each of us has a piece of the work that only we can do. There is a spark that is in you to redeem. The call is rarely as loud and clear as the call of the shofar, but if we listen closely, we can hear it. *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor* – the work is not yours to complete, but neither are you free to walk away.

Our Caring Cooks do their part twice each month, when they cook soups and stews for those who are hungry. Chopping vegetables can be holy work. Our Habitat for Humanity Temple Team did a small piece just two weeks ago, when we helped build a house in St. Henri. Plastering a ceiling, installing a floor, these can be holy work. We all can do something by bringing our donation bags back full of food, helping start the New Year with abundance. Grocery shopping can be holy work. Helping a senior up the ramp, helping a child see with more understanding eyes, all this can be holy work. Let Temple be the place you come, with your passion to make this world a better place, with your passion for a life well-lived, with your passion for tikkun.

Those who are breaking things in this world are going full speed ahead; we can do the same with our building. We can blame the state of the world on irredeemable evil or bad luck; we can blame the people sitting beside us, or even, as Moshe did, the people that we love; or we can roll up our sleeves for the holy work of repair.

May it be God's will that 5775 be a good year – but first, may it be our own. And yes, shanah tovah.

⁹ Personal communication, Sept. 14, 2014, shared by permission.