

“SLOW TO JUDGE”

Erev Yom Kippur, 5773/2012

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I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about *unetaneh tokef*, that troublesome prayer which forces us to confront the reality of our death. The prayer, then affirms that we can find transcendent meaning through *teshuvah*, which I suggested we understand as acting as if we're related to each person we meet, committing ourselves to seeing the Divine in every person. I suggested that we understand this synagogue as a microcosm of our Jewish and universal human family, affording us daily opportunities to strengthen our capacity for *teshuvah*, to come back to that higher awareness and behavior.

On the second day, I suggested that we think of *tefillah*, of prayer, in the broadest terms: as any practice that lifts us beyond the mundane and helps us sense that we each are part of something larger. I encouraged each of us to develop a daily practice that helps us deepen that awareness. As an example: last Wednesday night, I was part of the congregation at Bruce Springsteen's first concert at MetLife Stadium a week ago. I can assure you, there was a whole lot of *tefillah* going on. That counts, for me.

Tonight, Chapter Three: *tzedakah*, the last of the three practices prescribed by *unetaneh tokef*. How can we understand and practice *tzedakah* in our daily lives, individually and as a community?

Many of us learned the common understanding of the word *tzedakah* from the *pushke* in our home or in Hebrew School, into which we put our loose change. *Tzedakah* in this sense is the practice of material giving to those in need. It's related to, but not synonymous with, the Christian conception of charity, which derives from the Latin word *caritas*, or love. The practice of *charity* is rooted in love towards others.

But *tzedakah* derives from the Hebrew root *tzedek*, or right action. Judaism understands giving not as an act of *love*, but as an act of *justice*, of righting a wrong. Regardless of how much wealth we've accumulated, it's not ours to possess – our assets actually belong to God or, if you prefer, to society. We hold these assets in trust, and are morally obligated to transfer them to those who have less. Some might call this “redistribution;” Jews have always called it *tzedakah*. It's the right thing to do.

When we practice *tzedakah*, we not only benefit the recipients and promote a more just society; we fashion a different lens through which we view the world. Practicing *tzedakah* lifts us higher and enables us to see beyond ourselves. It reminds us that we are part of an interrelated web, that what we “own” has come to us from sources far beyond our personal efforts and skills. As individuals we can never truthfully say “I built that.” And to claim that I did is, in Jewish terms, idolatrous in the sense that I am mistaking the part for the whole.

The Book of Proverbs¹ claims that *tzedakah matzilah mi-mavet*, that *tzedakah* saves from death. The Talmud cites this to claim that one who gives *tzedakah* literally can avert one's demise. With all due respect to the Talmud, I doubt that. But it's easy for me to understand that sharing our resources with others helps *mitigate the reality of our mortality* by linking us with something transcending the limits of our egos. When we memorialize a loved one by giving *tzedakah* in their name, we extend the impact of our loved ones. We transcend the paralysis which grief sometimes brings.

¹ Proverbs 10:2

When *unetaneif tokef* claims that *tzedakah* softens the severity of our mortality, it may be referring to this financial aspect of the word. But I believe that it is referring to a broader understanding. *Tzedakah* refers to more than giving money; *tzedakah* also connotes an attitude, a stance we take towards others and ourselves. In a sense, it is one more *middah*, one more internal quality which can bring us closer to our better angels, and actualizing the godliness within us.

The Midrash² claims that when we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, God shifts from the throne of *din*, of judgment, to the throne of *rachamim*, the throne of compassion. The energy of the universe shifts from judgment to compassion. So maybe when we heard the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, it was calling us to pay attention to the nature of *our* judgment towards others and ourselves. Maybe it was inviting us to shift our attitude from harsh judgment towards compassion and forgiveness.

When we sing that powerful coda of *Avinu Malkeinu*, we pray: *choneinu va'aneinu, ki ein banu ma'asim, aseh imanu tzedakah va-chesed v'hoshieinu*. God, please respond to us, grant us grace, though "we have no deeds." Don't forgive us this on the basis of our actions, which may be inadequate; forgive us instead out of compassion and *tzedakah*. What does *tzedakah* mean in this context? It can't mean we're asking God for a loan or a handout. So what is the *tzedakah* for which we pray in *Avinu Malkeinu*?

Tzedakah is based on a Hebrew root which means justice -- but it doesn't connote what we usually think of as *strict* justice. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people: "appoint judges and magistrates in all of your gates, and they shall judge the people with *mishpat tzedek*," usually translated as "due justice." One Hasidic master (Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizensk) teaches that this verse refers not only to establishing an Israelite judicial system; it also describes our relationship as individuals with the quality of judgment.

Rabbi Elimelekh teaches that by cultivating a particular kind of judgment in each of "our gates," in each of our actions, we actually can "shift God" from the throne of strict judgment to the throne of compassion. By saying that magistrates must judge the people with "*mishpat tzedek*," the Torah urges us to integrate *tzedakah* into *mishpat*, to meld generosity into how we judge others and ourselves. Rabbi Elimelekh says each of us must work on ourselves, learning "to judge others with 'due justice,' to offer *tzedakah*, positive testimony and innocence, for all other[s]."

In other words, **justice actually requires and must be married to compassion**. They are intertwined. So when we ask for *tzedakah* in *Avinu Malkeinu*, we're just asking to be judged with kindness. There is a principle in the Talmud³ that, "the way a person measures [others], she is measured." In other words, we can't seek compassion in the way others judge us, if we ourselves are not generous in judging others.

In *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya teaches: *dan et kol adam lechaf zechut* – literally, judge every person with a "open hand of merit."⁴ In other words, give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Assume innocence until guilt is proven. According to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, this fundamental principle, while hard to practice, is critical to the process of *teshuvah*:

² Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 29:3

³ Megillah 12b

⁴ Avot 1:6

You have to judge every person generously. Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked, it's your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness, someplace in that person where he is not evil. When you find that bit of goodness and judge the person *that* way, you really may raise her up to goodness. Treating people this way allows them to be restored, to come to *teshuvah*.... By looking for that "little bit," the place however small within them where there is no sin (and everyone, after all, has such a place) and by showing them that *that's* who they are, we can help them change their lives.

Even the person you think (and he agrees!) is completely rotten – how is it possible that at some time in his life she has not done some good deed, some mitzvah? Your job is just to help her look for it, to seek it out, and then to judge her that way.... By seeking out that bit of goodness you allowed *teshuvah* to take its course.

Who among us has not made judgments about the words, the silence, the action or the inaction of another person, only to discover later that we had based our judgment on an incorrect assumption? Who among us has not realized later our *own* role in the situation about which we felt so much judgment of others?

For those of us who rush to criticize, it's not so easy to soften our judgments. After all, judgments allow us to imagine that we're superior to those we critique. They enable us to feel self-righteous, and what's sweeter than that? Judgments help us maintain emotional distance from those whom we judge. They may suggest our fear of the other, or fear of the possibility that he/she might be in the right.

Imagine if we actually practiced *tzedakah* as Rabbi Nachman suggests. Imagine if I could intercept a judgmental thought when it arises about someone, and replace it with something positive about that person. Imagine if instead of thinking to myself, "What a stupid thing to say!" I asked myself what I might learn from what I'd just heard? Imagine if I learned to interpret what I've witnessed in the most favorable light, instead of the least. Imagine if instead of thinking the worst about others, I focused on what's best.

Rabbi Nachman advises us to apply this approach not only to our judgments of others, but to the judgments we make about ourselves:

So, my friend, now that you know how to treat the wicked and find some bit of good in them – go do it for yourself as well! You, too, must have done some good for someone sometime. Now go look for it! But you find it and discover that it is too full of holes. You know yourself too well to be fooled: "Even the good things I did," you say, "were all for the wrong reasons. Impure motives! Lousy deeds!" Then keep digging! I tell you, keep digging, because somewhere inside that now-tarnished mitzvah, somewhere in it there was indeed a little bit of good. That's all you need to find: just the smallest bit: a dot of goodness. That should be enough to give you life, to bring you back to joy.

For those of us who are our own worst enemy, self-critical thoughts are automatic. We're hard-wired to come down hard on ourselves. Sometimes we may feel like a fraud, undeserving of positive regard. Sometimes harsh judgments have been imprinted on us by our families of origin. Sometimes we think we need to be tough on ourselves as motivation. We may believe that unless we're critical of ourselves, we'll be complacent and never try our best.

Judgment does serve an important purpose. *Din*, judgment, provides our moral compass. It enables us to do the work of *heshbon hanefesh*, personal moral accounting, which we undertake this season. Without judgment, we'd never know when or how to set boundaries. People could walk all over us like doormats. We'd never have an honest and respectful disagreement or debate. The kids would never go to sleep and they'd eat ice cream all day. We need *din*, we need the capacity to make judgment. We need to discern the difference between right and the wrong; we need to take a stand for the right.

So this is not a prescription for letting ourselves off easy, for ignoring that which is problematic in others and in ourselves. It's not an endorsement of moral relativism or abandoning principles. ***Tzedakah* reminds us that judgment doesn't have to be harsh.** We can and must judge ourselves and others – but we must do so with generosity of spirit.

Step One in softening our judgments is to admit how attached we are to them -- how much we actually *enjoy* judging others, or how automatically we judge ourselves. We have to **admit how little, in the moment, we can control our instant, harsh judgments.** Whether we like it or not, they just keep coming, uninvited and unbidden: large and small, constant mental slaps we administer to others or to ourselves.

So tonight let me invite you to imagine how our lives might be different if we judged each other and ourselves with *tzedakah*, with generosity of spirit. How much safer would the world feel for each of us if we felt as though others were giving us the benefit of the doubt, instead of pouncing in judgment on what we say and do?

How differently would we experience would this congregation – this microcosm of our human and Jewish family – if we judged each other even five per cent more generously? How much warmer and more pleasant would it feel if we eased up a little on ourselves and each other? What would it feel like if instead of offering an instant critique, instead of jumping on each other's opinions or perceived mistakes, we decided to hold our tongue, to see how things play out?

The *sh'losh esreh* middot, the 13 attributes of God we chant over and over today as our mantra for Yom Kippur, describe the Divine as *erech apayim*, slow to anger. This piece of Torah reveals that from a Jewish perspective, we act more godly when we slow down in our judgments, when we consider ourselves and others from the perspective of compassion, mercy, forgiveness and grace.

When we practice *tzedakah* in judgment, it's a little easier to do *teshuvah*, to come closer to our more authentic self and to each other. It's a little easier to practice *tefilah*, to rediscover the song that lies within us. By practicing *tzedakah* in judgment -- by seeking out a bit of goodness in ourselves and each other -- Rabbi Nachman teaches that we can change our lives. "The first dot of goodness is the hardest to find," he says, "or the hardest to *admit* we find. But the next ones come easier, each following another."

"And you know what?" he asks. "These little dots of goodness ... after a while you will find that you can *sing* them and they become your *niggun*, the *niggun* you fashion by not letting yourself be pushed down, and by rescuing your own good spirit.... The *niggun* brings you back to life and then you can start to pray."⁵

⁵ *Likkutei MoHaRa*"N 282, translated by Arthur Green

We stand tonight on the threshold of fresh New Year. This year, may we learn to practice *tzedakah*, gentle judgment, towards ourselves and others. Instead of seeing others as threats or obstacles, may we view them compassionately as flawed, imperfect human beings, just like us. Instead of jumping on our own imperfections, may we look instead to what's best in us. May we judge our failings by the light of the holy sparks within us. May we rescue our souls from the suffocation of harsh judgment.

Through *teshuvah*, witnessing the Divine in each other; through *tefilah*, strengthening our sense of being part of something greater; and through *tzedakah*, generosity of spirit towards self and others -- through these three practices this year, may we temper the suffering of this world by choosing life over death. And may our first instinct become noticing the sparks of holiness in ourselves and each other, so we might join in a niggun that links us to each other, to those who have come before us and to those who will follow -- a melody that might carry us through the blessings and challenges that await us. May it all come to us and to the world *l'tovah* -- for good.