

The Promise in This Day

During rabbinical school, I did a rotation at Camp Ramah, Ramah day camp in Philadelphia. I taught a few classes and led tefilot. Which meant that every morning, I sang a cheery tune for the first prayer we are to say in the morning: Mode Ani.

One morning, I struggled to muster the energy. Maybe I hadn't had coffee yet. Maybe I just wasn't in the mood. I lived up to expectation, and I started to work on a melody that spoke to me of just waking up.

Here is the interpretative translation I wrote: Thank you God, at the dawning of the promise in this day, for my soul You renew every morning; for this and more do I pray.

Oh, the promise, the potential ... of each day!

Let's have a show of hands:

How many of us come to shul on the High Holy Days to bemoan the unrealized promise, the potential, of the past year, or to discuss Jewish law about the nature of promises, of vows?

Not too many, I see.

How many of us are here to explore forgiveness, to make amends, and to make new promises with the resolve to work at improving relationships and building a better world in the coming year?

How many are here hoping that *teshuva*, *tefilla* and *tzedaka* / that our inner spirit, our prayers, and our generous actions will collide, erupting in a magnificent nova of goodness

and well-being that will light our way through a new year of health, happiness and peace? (That's better!)

That inner spirit, the part of us that can engage with or drive *teshuva* — repentance, changing our ways, our direction — that inner spirit cannot do its work without forgiveness.

Forgiveness. It's a hard word.

It is hard to ask for forgiveness; it is hard to give it.

Requesting forgiveness is fraught with fear of confrontation, of opening old wounds, of admitting to overstepping bounds. It is exposing ourselves to vulnerability, to being wholly human; it is hard to admit being wrong.

Forgiving someone is also challenging. It is hard to forget being wronged; it is hard to live with the memory; it is really hard to restore a relationship.

During these *asseret y'mai teshuva* / ten days of repentance from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur, we are encouraged to seek forgiveness from those we've wronged and to give it to those who ask.

We also seek forgiveness for vows we might have made — to others, to our selves, to God — and have not fulfilled.

We always have permission, at any time of the year, to forgive our selves.

There is one catch to genuine teshuva: We need to TELL the person we hurt that we are repenting, we need to say what we did, that we are sorry and that we are changing. Even if we're forgiving ourselves, we must verbalize it.

For what ought we seek forgiveness? Personal "oopses" such as missed deadlines, forgetting to invite a relative to a family event, neglecting a major birthday ... How about gross oversights, insults, deceit? Or for wrongs involving family, friends, colleagues? What about wrongs committed by our community, by our country?

In an article titled "Seeking Forgiveness for Structural Injustice," the Associate Dean of the JTS Rabbinical School, Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay, poses this question: How do you ask forgiveness for being part of a system that you didn't create...?

How should we feel about some of the ills of our nation, of our world? Why would we seek forgiveness for those; should we feel responsible? If "yes," what do we do, and with or for whom?

Should we be responsible for legacy or inherited **wrongs**, such as the extremely long-Covid, so to speak, of slavery; for the precarious ecological state of our planet; for ongoing deadly antagonism among countries.

I believe we are seeing not so faint ripples of slavery in current politics, tunnel vision and fear of the other in demands that school

libraries and education at all levels be censored; a breach of church/state separation in public funding going to private religious schools; racism or socioeconomic bias in the defamation and physical decline of the public school system that has long been the breeding ground of education, democracy and advancement in these United States.

A recent New York Times piece about the deleterious effect of single-parenthood on children noted that, in our country, most single parents are Black and Hispanic mothers. For single-parent children, rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and, consequently, ability to garner decently-paying jobs, were substantively lower than for children raised in two-parent homes. Also, children raised by a single parent were more likely to become single parents themselves.

Is this kind of thing our problem? Should it be on our *al cheit* list, that litany of negative behaviors we will recite next week at Yom Kippur services? "... for the sin of neglecting our neighbors."

Perhaps it should be, along with the sin of obscenely high levels of child poverty and hunger in a country that offers supermarket shoppers a wall of variously flavored potato chips and bulging shelves of pet food?

Or, that we have a federal minimum wage, at \$7.25 an hour since 2009, that is worth some 40% less than the minimum wage in 1968? (Can you even imagine trying to live on less than \$15,000 a year?)

There is such promise, such potential, in this country! The Declaration of Independence states “Truths,” essentially promises, vows, due all our citizens: the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Which should not translate to “you may live in a way that gives you the freedom to be uneducated and poor, forever trudging on a gerbil wheel, vainly chasing happiness.”

So much wasted promise!

We ought to seek forgiveness from those Americans suffering from a long ago but not very far away scourge for which every citizen should be, embarrassed at worst, contrite at best. How best to do this is a fair question.

But we should do something positive to address the need. I am certain, I am confident, that, in this great country, we have the ingenuity, the intelligence to do this equitably, in ways that those who have will barely notice a change in what they have.

Looking over last year, what about the promises we made to one another? The goals we set but couldn't reach? Our unrealized intention to leave for our children a world in better condition than it was before we had kids?

Our Jewish legal tradition generally looks askance at promises, or **vows** in biblical or talmudic terms. Vows can be so troublesome that the Talmud, our compendium of rabbinic discourse on law, lore and much more, devotes hundreds of pages to the subject.

The short of the Talmudic discussion is: As best you can, avoid making vows!

We will see in just eight days the challenge of vows, when we recite Kol Nidrei. Kol Nidrei is a ritual dissolution of vows that we might have made in the past year — or, depending upon one's interpretation, it is a preemptive disavowal of oaths we might make in the year ahead.

The late medieval Rabbi Asher b. Yehiel, Germany/Spain, observes that Kol Nidrei itself isn't a magic formula; its power lies in that the entire community says it together quietly, such that the community releases themselves from their own vows and the prayer leader's vows as well... .

Whether about past promises or future vows, Kol Nidrei generates debate over its meaning, its efficacy, even over “how does it look to the goyim: If Jews can annul vows with this brief formula, who would trust us?” For that reason, as early as the 9th century, some sages declared that Kol Nidrei should not be recited.

But that's really so next week!

We have another ritual relating to vows and sins: *Vidui*. *Vidui*, meaning confession, is a traditional part of the dying process, a deathbed self-exoneration from the consequences of sin, a formula for ritual soul-cleansing. It's a way to ease the passage at an often trying time.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson described *Vidui* in an anecdote about his father in hospice.

Reciting *Vidui* on behalf of his father, Rabbi Artson prayed (in his own translation): “May it be Your will, Adonai, to send healing to my beloved father. If the end is imminent, may it reflect Your love and atone for all those times he could have done better.”

“All those times he could have done better.” Words that perhaps often apply to most of us. I certainly feel them.

Vidui is recited by or with the dying person or, if that person is unable to participate, it is read by someone else at bedside. I am not aware that *vidui* is meant to touch those whom the dying person may have wronged.

Which may be why the early first millennium sage Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus taught: “Repent — do *teshuva* — the day before you die.” He recommends that we engage in *teshuva* every day!

The traditional text of *vidui* speaks of death as atonement for all transgression. How can death cleanse us so thoroughly? For some of us, isn’t there a chance that our permanent record card will follow us to the afterlife, maybe even deny us admission?

(During my less-than-stellar high school and undergraduate years, I felt that the academic permanent record card was going to haunt my future ... forever. Even so, back then I didn’t live up to my promise, if I could even describe what that was; I guess I just wasn’t ready.)

Vidui’s power lies in its permission to forgive oneself, and certainly in its message that all

will be forgiven ... now that it’s too late to make amends.

So, *Teshuva* — every day!

Every day we should strive to live up to our promise, the rich possibilities always within us.

Every day, we should be attentive to the promises, the vows we make — to others, to our selves, to God.

Every day, we have the potential to do *teshuva* — to alter our direction, to change what we do in ways small or large.

Of course, it’s fine that you come to shul on the High Holy Days to bemoan the unrealized promise of the past year, or to discuss Jewish law about the nature of promises, of vows.

But I am sure that you will get more out of exploring forgiveness, seeking to make amends, and making new promises with the resolve to improve relationships and build a better world in the coming year.

And you just might find that *teshuva*, *tefilla* and *tzedaka* / that your inner spirit, your prayers, and your generous actions will collide, erupting in a magnificent nova of goodness and well-being that will light your way through a new year of health, happiness and peace.

Shana tova!