

FORGIVENESS

Yom Kippur Morning
Jacksonville, FL 5780

A few days ago, I floated down the Ichetucknee River with several families who had chosen to engage in the ritual of *tashlich* with me. We stood on the river bank, having already gotten our rafts, and said some ancient words. This ritual helps us cast off our sins.

I wrote what I needed to say, cast it into the water along with everyone else and hopped in my tube with my youngest son, Daniel. Then I started to see something profound. I want to share with you what I experienced that morning.

I began to understand, as if for the first time, the words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov who said: "All the world is a narrow bridge. There is nothingness at the beginning of life and nothingness at the end. Life is what we do between the nothingness." We are given an opportunity to float down the river of life, or in the image provided by Rabbi Nachman, cross the bridge. We spend much of our lives not realizing this deep truth - sometimes we glimpse it though - as I did that morning.

There are many different strategies for floating down the river of life. You have the option of floating with a paddle and attempting to control the outcome of things around you. You can float solo in a tube - bare foot and with nothing. You can float in a tube designed for two and hook your floaties with other people's floaties. You can, during your ride, voluntarily hop off the floaty to inspect what is underneath. You will return to the floaty wet, but you will be able to continue on. Along the way, you will bump into other people also floating and decide what you want to do with them - talk to them, ignore them, wave at them or float with them.

But at the end of the day - everyone begins from nothing and returns to nothing.

What was equally astounding was what happened to me and my children on the river.

My two older children decided that they were tubing experts and did not need to be attached either by their invisible umbilical cords or the physical rope to me. As my two older children unhooked themselves by untying a knot to float down, I could feel the anxiety level rising inside of me. I could see visions of their raft overturning, I could see them getting caught on the side of the banks, I could see them struggle in my minds eye.

I took a deep breath. Rabbi Nachman's words again appeared in my head. We spend much of our life on this narrow bridge, and are unaware that it is even there until we wake up and see it. We feel the terror of the realization that life is simply a journey from "birth to death to life everlasting."¹ At that moment we truly begin to wonder: what have we done with our lives? My children were going to end up floating down the river and end up at the same spot as myself. Even unconnected we would still float together. I kept breathing.

As we floated down the river, a piece of the rice paper was floating alongside of me. The same ricepaper that we had just collectively cast into the river. It stayed with me for a short time before finally dissolving. The words of the prayer I had said came into my mind - this time with more poignancy than the first time when I had just said them out loud:

"Help me to stop carrying the karmic baggage of my poor choices. As I cast this bread upon the waters, lift my troubles off my shoulders."²

I had written on the sheet of paper, not simply a description of my particular sins, but also wrote notes regarding the residual feelings committing those transgressions had left on my soul. I wrote about my anger from being

¹ Alvine Fine's poem: Life is a Journey"

² Velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com a prayer for Tashlich

wronged and asked God to help me put it all down. That morning I knew that I couldn't forgive myself, until I started to put down the anger.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, a legendary spiritual leader and composer of music came to this country as a teenage, refugee from Nazi controlled Austria. He would go later in life back to perform concerts for free in both Austria and Germany. When asked how he could do this, he would said: "I only have one soul. If I had two souls, I would gladly devote one of them to hating the Germans full-time. But I don't. I only have one soul, and I'm not going to waste it on hating."³

As I floated, the rice paper floating alongside me, I realized that we were doing a dance -- Rabbi Carlebach's words came alive in my heart. I also recalled the Hebrew word for forgiveness - *michilah*. The Hebrew word for circle is *michol*. Pain in our lives is caused when brokenness occurs. Whether it is brokenness that we ourselves caused by our actions or they were caused by someone else. Forgiveness is part of the process for making the circle whole again and healing the brokenness.

The rabbis in the Talmud go to great lengths when discussing the process of *teshuvah*. They understood that in order for the process of *teshuvah* to be complete, the person who committed a wrong must come and ask forgiveness. The rabbis did not want to interfere in the internal process of the other person needing to realize their wrong doing and come and ask forgiveness. Therefore much of our text for this holiday season is focused on the steps of repentance. We read there that the wrongdoer needed to be cleansed of his or her wrongdoing and the victim needed to put down the hot coal of anger that they were holding. That this process usually involves two people.

But what happens when the person who deeply hurt you does not come to make amends?

³ Rabbi Alan Lew; This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared; The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation. Little Brown and Company Boston 2003: P.231

I realized something about the rice paper again.

By not putting down the anger...the rice paper...would continue to float next to me. I would focus on it, I would watch how the water slowly was absorbed by it. I would give it energy and attention. I found myself focused on it, so much so, that I could not see the beauty of life around me nor enjoy the opportunity to float down the river. By letting go of the anger, we also let go of the leverage we imagine it gives us against others.

I shared this story in Torah Study this past Saturday morning, and I will share it with you today.

It comes from Eva Moses Kor, a survivor from Auschwitz.

“On January 27, 1995, at the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I stood by the ruins of the gas chambers with my children...while I read my document of forgiveness and signed it. As I did that I felt a burden of pain was lifted from me. I was no longer in the grip of pain and hate; I was finally free.

The day I forgave the Nazis, privately I forgave my parents whom I hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz. Children expect their parents to protect them, mine couldn't. And then I forgave myself for hating my parents. Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment. I call it a miracle medicine. It is free, it works and has no side effects.”

I understood that sometimes I can not wait for the person who wronged me to come to me and ask forgiveness. Sometimes, I need to forgive them in my heart. The other person, after all, may never come. I did not need to hold on to the hot coal of anger; I did not need to keep dancing with the rice paper. The self-righteousness of knowing I was wronged would not propel me forward down the river. Holding on to the anger surrounding the person we imagine to be our enemy in our heart, so that we can be prepared to hurt them back - **only hurts us**. That anger and pain burns us and hurts our soul. It burdens us and prevents us from moving forward.

In case you feel the burden of anger is too overwhelming to put down or you believe that only *you* have this type of anger. The rabbis teach us that even God experiences anger. What angers God? According to the rabbis, God is angered by our behavior. Specifically, when we engage in behavior that prevents us from worshipping Adonai. God moderated God's own anger and exhibited self-restraint.

It was taught in the Talmud, that on Yom Kippur the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies. He would offer incense and pray with great intentions. One year, when Rabbi Yishmael Ben Elisha entered he had a vision of God sitting on God's throne. God shared His own prayer with the High Priest that day and the High Priest said it.

“May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger,
And May Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes,
And May You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy,
And May You enter before them beyond the letter of the law.”⁴

The rabbis teach:

“Those who are insulted but do not insult, who hear themselves reviled but do not answer, and who act through love and rejoice in suffering, of them Scripture says, *Those who love [God] are like the sun rising in might.* (Judges 5:31)”⁵

Anger can never lead to love. Only love produces love. Only compassion, both toward ourselves and others, can release us from the prison of our own anger and help us forgive.⁶

⁴ Berakhot 7a

⁵ Talmud Shabbat 88b (Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, *The Talmud of Relationships, Volume 1 God, Self and Family*), JPS; p.38.

⁶ Lew, p. 235.

Today is the day we fast, we don't eat and we don't drink. We reenact our death. It is the day when we recognize that we only have one journey down the river of life.

So I ask you:

Who have you hurt?

Who has hurt you?

You have only one life to live, one soul given as a gift by God. The ride down the river happens faster than we want. Rabbi Nachman was right - life is a narrow bridge. I have danced with my rice paper and I am sure you have as well. This past Sunday I let it dissolve. Afterward, I saw turtles, a white crane, and red flowers. I laughed with my children. My children and I later reconnected our rafts after Aiden and I both ended up in the river and laughed some more.

Forgiveness is hard, letting go of anger is not easy. But the reward is great!