

## Transforming Hurt into Healing

My children are at the age when showering is just not that important. They're young enough that crazy hair is cool and quite frankly, I will do anything to avoid a fight. So, I breathe a sigh of relief when they go swimming and reserve the shower for when it's really necessary. After a few days of Krav Maga and just general kid living, however, I explain to them that they have to shower...for real...with soap. Why? they complain. Because, I explain. Every now and then we all need a good scrub, to feel really clean. It may take a lot of effort, and sometimes we don't love what we find under the dirt, but it must be done.

But you're not here tonight to hear about my child rearing philosophy - you're here because it's Erev Rosh Hashana - one of the holiest nights in the Jewish Year. For much of the year, we walk around like zombies. Very often we feel as if our hearts are being squeezed - we've made many mistakes. We have hurt people we love. We have watched close relationships with family or friends disappear. Maybe we've failed at business or just finally realize that it's time to mourn a dream. We feel powerless, just sort of watching life unfold around us, wishing that we could somehow dig ourselves out of the hole that we're in. That's what tonight signals to us - when you get your car washed, you park it on that track and right before the water turns on and the car moves forward, an alarm goes off and lights flash. That's what this season of the High Holy Days is all about - it's the siren and flashing lights that go on right before your soul gets a good wash or detail. It's the good scrub that we get from a much

needed shower - but the scrub that this season gives us cleanses the heart and the soul.

The choreography of the High Holy Days is designed to remind each one of us that every moment we have the opportunity to redefine the fine points of our lives. It is so easy when something painful happens to blame God - and there are times, unimaginable times, that there seems like no one else to blame. However, for the simpler things, the things we bring on ourselves it seems that sometimes it just takes jump starting ourselves out of our complacency and reminding ourselves that one of the central tenants of the Jewish religion is that change is possible, and welcome. People can change. Circumstances can change. It is all within our grasp.

Political commentator PJ O'Rourke once said, "One of the annoying things about believing in free will and individual responsibility is the difficulty of finding somebody to blame your problems on. And when you do find somebody, it's remarkable how often his picture turns up on your driver's license."

Rosh Hashana gives us an opportunity - If you want to be good and loving, be that person. If you want to be a bore, a thief, a fool - then you have the right to act that way as well. Isaac Bashevis Singer says it best "You must believe in free will, there is no choice." We are the masters of our own destiny, so what can you do if your life doesn't resemble the one that you had hoped for? You change. You scrub. You make teshuvah - you change paths and turn towards another. You have the ability today to change your heart and your life around.

It's terrifying to think about. This holiday is scary. It exposes us and makes us raw and introspective. It gives us time to take a step back and examine our lives and our fears and to take responsibility. Ask yourselves now, what if what I'm saying is true - what if we really can write a new chapter for ourselves - how would it read? What would we do with our reliance on our fears if we were to take seriously this opportunity to change? If you were to leave this earth today, what would people say about you? Would you want to know?

At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph reconciles with his brothers decades after they plot his death and sell him into slavery. Joseph decides to forgive them - deciding that life goes on despite past hurts. The brothers know that they don't deserve to be forgiven and are grateful and humbled...however, in the back of their minds they distrust Joseph. Pretty soon they are terrorized by the possibility that Joseph will finally take revenge on them for what they have done to him. They are shocked when, fearfully, they approach him, and what does Joseph do? He begins to cry and reassure them. "I promise you." he says. "I will never hurt you." We know the subtext is "Yes, you intended to hurt me, but that suffering made me the man I am today - a strong man, a humble man, a man of God."

Out of the depths of suffering, the most common cry is "why?" When we are deep in the middle of pain, we believe that we can never feel better. We want to blame God, we want to blame ourselves and others. We feel powerless and hopeless and alone. Then one day, we smile a little - and on another day, we laugh. Pretty soon, little by little, we emerge into the light

of day, the light of hope. Please understand, I am most humbled by people who have been through insurmountable pain, yet somehow have the strength to live life. They have lived through sickness or death or violence - obviously not caused by their own free will. There would be no way that they could have changed what happened, but what they did have control over is how they reacted to the situation. It is so easy, when disaster or pain strike, to stay under the covers and cease to live - but what makes these people that I speak of heroes is that they were able, are able, to greet each day despite their pain and to make a difference in the world. They use their free will to turn hopelessness into hope and powerless into power and possibility.

The most definitive moment of my life came, when as a teenager, I lost my father suddenly. He was there one moment, gone the next and I spent countless hours watching the door waiting for him to walk through and announce that the pain that had descended upon me was all a big mistake. Not only did I fall into the proverbial pit of despair, I dove. But I realize today, almost 25 years later, that my definitive moment was not the moment of his death, but a moment a few months later. I remember holding the college acceptances to two different colleges in my hands - one to a university a ten minute drive away from home, the other a more challenging 8 hour drive. Without hesitating for a moment my mother told me to pick the school 8 hours away. "If you don't break from home now, she said, you'll never be able to leave." You would have to know my mother to understand what an incredible strength this took. For 25 years, my mother has mourned my father's death. But in this one moment, just one month after losing my father, she chose to be completely selfless, sending her

youngest child away in order to transform my life. Only now can I see that the moment that changed me and my direction in this world wasn't the one forced upon me by life, but offered to me by my mother.

In Hebrew the same word - mashbir - is used both for birth and brokenness. Brokenness is sometimes necessary for the beginning of something completely new. When we face a crisis, or something terrifying, our walls crack and new opportunities arise that can be either positive or negative. Walking through the shuk in Jerusalem this summer, I came across an unusual box made up of all sorts of ceramic pieces. The owner of the shop explained that this was a mediterranean shard box. In certain parts of the world, when there's an earthquake and family ceramics fall and are smashed, the family gathers the broken pieces and brings them to an artist who crates a shard box which becomes a treasured piece of the future made out of the family treasures of yesterday. That encapsulates our challenge at the beginning of each year - collect the broken pieces of our hearts and souls - to honor them and treasure them for what they have taught us about our lives and the world around us. We gather the pieces and instead of allowing them to fracture even more, we bind them together and use them for something productive.

Rabbi Shomo Carlebach used to say, "every street I thought was the wrong street, turns out to have been the only way to get there."

How many of us can now recognize in retrospect that a crisis - whether inflicted upon us or the result of a mistake we made - was, in fact, the birth of something new?

I have to confess to you that life's transformative possibilities cause me a certain amount of personal terror. There are times that it seems almost impossible to extract meaning and purpose even from moments of deep pain. One of the most vivid pictures I have in my mind from the Holocaust was described by Eli Wiesel in his book, *Night*. Wiesel has just witnessed the murder of a young boy and he says,

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

“Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .”

For Wiesel, this horrible moment signifies the low point of his faith in God. The death of the child also symbolizes the death of Wiesel's own childhood and innocence. The suffering he sees and experiences during the Holocaust transforms his entire worldview. Earlier in the novel, when people would ask why Wiesel prayed he would reply, “Why did I pray? What a strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?” Observance and belief were unquestioned parts of his core sense of identity, so once his faith is irreparably shaken, he becomes a completely different person.

But, in the same breath, I am reminded of Viktor Frankl's stubborn refusal to give up the possibility of meaning, even from the depths of those same camps. “We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential...to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn

one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves...In some ways, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning."

And so, it is in that spirit that I propose that the High Holy Days are a kind of desperate affirmation of our ability to unstick ourselves by finding meaning and creating possibility from our pain. To move again. To love again, to become something else. The next ten days leading to Yom Kippur are meant as a time to wrestle with the disturbing image we have of God sitting before the giant Book of Life, making His list and checking it twice. As you wrestle with this image - and wrestle you do, otherwise why would our sanctuary be full twice a year on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I want to invite you to think about your Book of Life - the book that you write with every decision you make, every day. Will you pull the covers over your head, or take one step at a time into the shower to scrub yourself clean. Writing your own Book of Life means that you get to choose who the heroes and who the villains are. You get to choose if the story is one of failure or one of growth, one of defeat or one of healing.

One of my professors from rabbinical school, Neil Gillman, teaches that through memory and with perspective, the past actually changes. He says that the past is never just the past, it changes based on how you look at it. In other words, you can change pain into possibility.

The author Jim Butcher writes, "God isn't about making good things happen to you, or bad things happen to you. He's all about you making choices - exercising the gift of free will. God wants you to have good things

and a good life, but He won't gift wrap them for you. You have to choose the actions that lead you to that life."

Our Rabbis taught that the darkest moment of the night is the moment just before sunrise. And what is born from the deepest darkness? In that hour God answers the world and all that are in it - out of the darkness God brings forth the dawn and gives light to the world.

My prayer for our community this year is that we recognize our innate capacity to change, to grow, to unstick ourselves, to scrub ourselves clean. Those of us who are here who have overcome, I pray that you remember your power, for life occasionally throws us additional hurdles. And for those of us who are stuck, who want desperately to move but can't imagine how, I pray that you immerse yourselves deeply in these days of holy possibility. I pray that you allow yourself to believe not only in what is, but what ought to be and that you truly learn that from every hurt can emerge healing. Shanah Tovah u'Metukah.