

Erev YK 5784 – Choice and Returning to the Holy Potential Within

For Louis D. Brandeis¹, life at Harvard Law School was not easy, although it wasn't the curriculum that made his journey so difficult. For three years, students sat next to him uninvited at lunch each day. They said things like, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. You could end up on the Supreme Court if only you weren't a Jew. Why don't you convert? Then all your problems would be solved." Brandeis listened but never responded.

By his final year of law school, Brandeis's preeminence could no longer be denied. Jewish or not, he was invited to join the honor society. It was an electric moment—the first time that the exclusive society had accepted a Jew. On the evening of the official induction, the room was hushed; the atmosphere was thick. All eyes were on Brandeis as he walked to the lectern. Slowly he looked around the room.

"I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew."

With that, the room erupted in applause. There was an explosion of shouting and cheers.

"We have convinced him," the members of the audience thought. "Finally, finally, he has seen our point!"

Brandeis waited for the excitement to abate. When silence was reestablished, he began again. "I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

This time there was no applause, no explosion of shouting or cheers. This time there was only silence. When the quiet had grown uncomfortable, members of the exclusive Harvard Honor society began to stand. However, they didn't walk out. Instead, awed by Brandeis's conviction and strength of character, and his unequivocal choice, the members of the society gave the honoree a standing ovation.²

Louis Brandeis's choice, to exercise restraint, to choose every day, his own identity, to choose his words with wisdom, is inspiring, and an example of the holy spark within.

¹ Louis Dembitz Brandeis (1856-1941) was an associate justice on the Supreme Court of the United States from 1916 to 1939. He became known as the "People's Lawyer," taking cases without pay so that he would be free to address the wider issues involved.

² Story told by Rabbi Jeffrey A. Wohlberg in *Three Times Chai* by Laney Katz Becker, pg 33-34.

Roughly six months ago we celebrated the holiday of Passover, and now, Yom Kippur. The two holidays, one in the Spring, and one in the Fall, are almost like bookends. The Spring is full of hope, of growth and renewal, and the Fall season is very much about harvest and preparation for winter. On a deeper level though, both holidays are about redemption. Passover is about the physical redemption from slavery – we become free people. We are not just free though, we are free, and now with the purpose of serving – not Pharaoh, but God. Yom Kippur is also about redemption, our spiritual redemption.

The moment of freedom is jubilant, filled with joy and celebration. We prepare for Passover by cleaning our homes and ridding our homes of *chametz*, leavening. The Passover seder is filled with song, clapping, smiles, and special foods.

Now we are here, with Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur. As beautiful and haunting as the music is, the sounds are vastly different than the songs of Passover. On Yom Kippur we grow hungry, thirsty, with lots of sitting, standing, and words and more words. Guilt and obligation draw some of us here, or we are drawn here by the time of year, a calling in our bones; some of us want to see friends, and some look to this time eagerly, seeing the High Holy Days as a gift of communal time to polish off the schmutz that has gathered on our souls and our hearts. Ultimately, we are all here by choice, the willingness to do the work of *teshuvah*.

In *Hilchot Teshuvah*, Maimonides, the 12th century philosopher, scholar, and author of the *Mishneh Torah*, wrote: “This text describes one mitzvah; that a sinner should repent from their sin before God and confess.”

How do we do *teshuvah*, how do we return? Maimonides teaches, “*Teshuva* and *Yom Kippur* only atone for transgression between us and God.”³ Jewish tradition holds that for transgressions between one person and another, teshuva consists of several stages, the four “R”s, **recognize, remorse, repair, and not repeat**: One must **recognize** their transgression, feel sincere **remorse**, **repair**: undo any damage done and pacify the victim of one’s offense, and **not repeat**: resolve never to commit the transgression again.

What is *teshuvah*? We understand it to mean repentance for sin. I’m not a fan of that definition. The true meaning is “to return.” Return to what? ***Return to the inner holy core that is the essence of your being.*** *Teshuvah* requires two essential steps: the first is to return to an awareness that within each of us is a spark of the Divine essence; the

³ Hilchot Teshuvah 2:9

second step is to make the knowledge of that the dominant force in our lives.⁴ The above instructions, the “Four ‘R’s” are completed with the intention of returning to the inner holy core that is the essence of one’s being, and making that the dominant force in one’s life.

The tough news is that doing this requires us to choose and it takes work. To choose means to be aware, to know ourselves, to govern our behavior despite what goes on around us, our environment, and our heredity. Louis Brandeis chose to exercise great restraint despite the environment he endured in law school.

How do we recognize the inner core within ourselves? Returning to our holy inner core, our inner light, and living in awareness of it, requires caring for it and cleaning off the “schmutz” that develops over it daily; this takes work. This internal work is just as important as the external work of exercising, eating, and brushing our teeth. Sometimes it’s just too hard to do or doesn’t feel so urgent.

While Passover represents our physical redemption from enslavement by God, Yom Kippur represents our soul’s redemption from enslavement, and this we do *b’eizat HaShem*, with God’s help. We gain freedom within our souls and clear off the schmutz over our holy inner light when we forgive – others and ourselves. The word “forgive” comes with a lot of baggage. We often think of it as “letting go of hurt,” “forgetting,” “letting someone off the hook,” but I don’t find any of these concepts truly useful.

Several years ago, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl gave a sermon with a teaching I find useful:

Often the most challenging part of offering forgiveness is the sense that the offender doesn’t deserve and hasn’t earned our forgiveness. But forgiveness is not about what you are offering someone else – it’s what you give yourself. Forgiveness is a decision about how you want to live. It’s taking control of how much power you allow someone else’s sin to have over you. It is a mistake to confuse forgiveness with justice, to think that withholding your forgiveness is a form of punishment for the person who hurt you. In fact, the opposite is often true: as the saying goes, “holding onto anger is like drinking poison, and expecting the other person to die.” It never works that way.

⁴ From the Introduction to Hilchot Teshuvah, by Eliyahu Touger.

How do we do *teshuvah*, how do we return? How do we recognize the holy inner core, the holy light within ourselves? How do we make it shine just a little bit more today? We gain freedom within our souls, we return to our truest selves, when we forgive.

Just to be clear, I am not suggesting that you *must* forgive someone, even yourself. Forgiveness is a choice and a process. The first step may be to choose not to get back at someone, to punish them.⁵ When we want retribution, this is a drain on ourselves, it enslaves our joy, it sabotages our spiritual freedom. Next is a willingness to acknowledge that the person, the source of the hurt, is an imperfect human being as we all are; when you see them, perhaps just nod and acknowledge their presence. This may grow to light chit-chat in time and even a sincere smile when you run into them, or it might not, but at this point the enslavement of your spirit diminishes. There are also people with whom it is appropriate to remain guarded; but that is for discussion at another time.

Forgiveness can also be seen as a form of prayer, a partnership with the Divine, calling forth the Divine light within, as we choose to step onto unsteady, unfamiliar ground. The place of hurt is the place we know. Instead, we can choose to courageously step into what we do not know. Being human is humbling and difficult – we are subject to the whims of others, as we try to survive, as we are imperfect and needy. Striving, we hurt and are hurt. And yet, we are called to fulfill our greatness, not just to survive. We are called to fulfill the potential of that spark of the Divine within us. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it! It begins with choice.

I have an idea – let's pass around these stones⁶, and I invite each of you to participate by taking one, my gift to you. Each of you are now holding a small stone. This symbolizes your inner core, the spark of the Divine within you. I know the stone is a bit "schmutzy." As you hold it, you are welcome to close your eyes.

I now invite you to think of moments over the last year, perhaps when you have felt hurt, guilt, remorse, regret, sadness, anger, towards another, or possibly towards yourself. Each time you remember something, I invite you to turn the stone over in the palm of your hand or hold it even tighter. You may use or ignore the following prompts:

- *A promise to someone that you forgot or couldn't keep. An unkept promise to you.*
- *A friend you did not call or visit. A friend who did not call or visit you.*
- *A promise to yourself that you forgot or couldn't keep.*

⁵ As taught to me and classmates by Rabbi Mordechai Finley, several years ago.

⁶ Colored stones of glass and crystal, made filmy with dust and dirt.

- *Unkind words you said, or someone said to you. Unkind words you said to yourself.*
- *The times when you wished you had responded better, wiser, or with restraint.*
- *In what areas have you done your best, but it was not enough.*
- *Is there forgiveness to ask for? Is there forgiveness to give yourself?*

With eyes closed, see the dusty film the experiences that come to mind have left on your inner core, diminishing your light.

Now peer in your mind's eye, through that schmutz that lies over your light within and glimpse with effort, how bright your light is, how it's trying to shine beyond the schmutz.

Seeing that holy spark striving to shine, I invite you to take a moment and now:

- *Acknowledge the goodness that you have intended, that you have tried to give, and what you have demanded of yourself.*
- *Acknowledge what you have given despite everything.*
- *Acknowledge the goodness you have given; and the goodness you have received.*
- *Acknowledge that gift that resides within you that you have to give.*
- *Is there something to give yourself?*
- *Is there something you see that you want to do differently going forward?*

We are here with the spark of the Divine within us, we are meant to be here, we are meant to shine our light into the world. There is something here each of us are meant to do, a unique gift only you can bring to the world, if we nurture the light within.

Holding your object, a symbol of your inner light, hold it a little tighter, turn it again in your hand. When you are ready, I invite you to open your eyes.

Each of you holds a unique stone, as unique as you are. It may be of glass or crystal, it may have a crack in it, a bump on it, perhaps a rough edge. You have picked the perfect stone. You may notice now that the stone shines forth a little bit brighter as you have held it and cared for it.

So may it be with our inner core, our holy spark within, as we choose to do the work this day and always, of *teshuvah* and forgiveness.

May we go forth in blessing.

G'mar chatimah tovah,

Rabbi Lisa Bock