

Aaron Weininger
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The Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons

Returning and Remembering: Living Into More of Ourselves

“You can’t be anyone else. You can only be more of yourself.” With these words communications expert and consultant Eda Roth began a seminar with eight rabbinical students, all of us on a retreat to craft visions of communal leadership for American Jewry.

I am humbled to be part of that rabbinical student group, and I have carried Eda’s words with me into Elul and into this Shabbat Shuvah. As I think about being more of myself and engaging the process of teshuvah, I want to consider the importance of remembering and drawing from lived experience.

Our Torah reading this morning, Parshat Ha’azinu, instructs us, “Zechor yemot olam, binu sh’not dor va’dor.” Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. Ask your parents, and they will inform you. Your elders, they will tell you.

With these words Moshe addresses the people. He gathers them to *remember* and pay attention so that they enter the covenant. According to the tradition, this unfolds on the day of his death, “b’yom moto l’hachnisam la’brit.” Like Eda from my retreat, Moshe recognizes the importance of being more of himself, of *remembering* his lived experience to enter into his full self as a leader- a flawed leader who will not bring his people into the Promised Land- but nonetheless a leader meeting his people where they are and pushing them to the next step of their journey. How remarkable that Moshe knows that he will die, and he’s out there on the day of his death exhorting the people to *remember* and take hold of the covenant.

The Ba’al Shem Tov teaches, “Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.”

So too for us the act of remembering is essential in our return to our full selves, to commit to teshuvah and taste redemption on the Yamim Noraim. For us to enter into the New Year with our full selves, we too must root ourselves in the past, in the lived experiences of pain and joy, in our wholeness and brokenness. The shofar is the call for us to live into those experiences and therefore live into more of our full selves. It is precisely the act of remembering that we call forth on Rosh Hashanah, the holiday known both as Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembering, and Yom Teruah, the day of shofar blasts. In the zichronot section of Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, one of the verses we chant is from Psalm 106, “vayizkor lahem berito,” calling to mind the covenant that God remembered when God saw us in distress and heard our cry. Commenting on this section in our beautiful new mahzor, Lev Shalem, Professor David Kraemer writes,

Memory is, primarily, a divine quality, representing God’s ability to overcome the limitations of a particular time, to see the part as one segment of a far greater whole. When humans remember, therefore, we are imitating God, overcoming our own limits, and, in God-like fashion, identifying with the breadth of history.

Remembering is essential, because memory is divine. It is part of what makes us all images of God. Fundamentally, our memory is who we are (p. 133).

What does it mean to remember and, as a result, return to be more of yourself in this season of teshuvah? The High Holy Day liturgy reads, “zokhreinu l’hayyim melekh hafetz bahayyim, v’khotveinu b’sefer ha’hayyim l’ma’ankha elohim hayyim.” Remember us for life, Sovereign, who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, God of life. We must first recall our lived experience in order for God to remember us and inscribe us in the Book of Life. We must return to be more of ourselves because that’s how God created us. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, “To us, recollection is a holy act; we sanctify the present by remembering the past. To us Jews, the essence of faith is memory. To believe is to remember.”

As some of you know, I returned a few months ago from a year of rabbinical studies in Israel, an experience of recent memory. It was a year of intense learning. My time there compelled me to consider *how*, not if, the identities I carry as a rabbinical student will enrich the ministry of my rabbinate. As a gay person, the first out student to be admitted for ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary, it meant realizing the brokenness of communities that do not affirm each person’s capacity to live into his or her full self. Machon Schechter, the Conservative rabbinical school in Jerusalem, refuses ordination to openly gay and lesbian Israelis and quashes dissenting voices among its students and faculty. Its official policy on ordination states that gay and lesbian Jews are not fit to be role models, that our so-called permissive and curable lifestyle is analogous to incest, and that we are undermining family values. Machon Schechter will, however, *permit* matriculated openly gay and lesbian JTS students to take courses there for our year of study. Any assurances of being *permitted* to study didn’t mean much when my lived experience was disregarded. It wasn’t enough to be tolerated in a space where I was training to become a rabbi, a calling that requires me to be my full self as I teach others to live into the entirety of their humanity. As I walked into Machon Schechter each day, I recited to myself from the daily blessings, “Praised are You God, who has made me in Your image.”

My experience at Machon Schechter and decision along with four other gay and straight JTS students to leave and create an alternative academic program, taught me as Eda reminded me at the retreat, that I can’t be someone else but only more of myself. That realization came with a sense of brokenness since no rabbinical student wants his or her lived experience and identity to be invisible in or erased by his or her own school. *But when we enter into spaces that merely tolerate our core identities, we deny the full potential of our lived experience to transform, animate, and sanctify our world.* Such denial comes in the form of withholding ordination on the basis of sexual orientation, which taught me about my ironic privilege as a gay JTS student studying at an Israeli institution that discriminates against Israelis. Such denial comes in the form of Orthodox rabbis wreaking havoc on Women of the Wall in Jerusalem, attacking women who daven at the Kotel for bringing their full selves into their egalitarian tefillah. Such denial comes in the form of members of Knesset attempting to pass the Rotem conversion bill, which would make it impossible for Jews converted by Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist rabbis from being recognized in Israel. Debate in community is a value, but it cannot unfold at the expense of human dignity. Disregard for ethical imperatives that root my observance, just like my ritual commitments do, is a travesty of everything holy. Perpetrated in God’s name, these actions deny people the ability to live into their full selves

made in God's image. Such disregard silences the call of the shofar and the sacred act of remembering to be more of ourselves on these Yamim Noraim.

I recall my experience in Jerusalem this Shabbat Shuvah because it reminds me how I return to be myself as part of teshuvah, how I walk with different identities and lived experience and *how*, not if, these inform my calling. When I returned to Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan for a second unit as a chaplain intern, working on the intensive care and adult and adolescent psychiatric units, I drew from my experience in Jerusalem. Not because one narrates a particular personal experience to patients – I would not do that. But being aware of my lived experience brings me into a deeper awareness of the person sitting in front of me, conscious of the sacred words of human texts in the complex living Torah of chaplaincy: a woman mourning the sudden death of her ex-husband in the ICU, a man dying alone with AIDS, a psych patient who identifies as one of the 10,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender homeless youth in New York City. I share the music behind the words of my experience so that a patient's experience can emerge from the darkness of the hospital room. In so doing, I invite God's presence. Accessing lived experience gives me the capacity for empathy, to journey with a person as he sinks into the depths of isolation like Jonah into the fish, to be with a person as she suffers in silence like Sarah when her son Isaac is brought as a sacrifice, to be with a person in his or her despair, hope and fear, as I imagine Moshe experiences when he stands at the brink of life and death in our Torah reading this morning. *Awareness of lived experience allows me to be more of myself, not someone else, precisely so that I can journey with someone else in his or her lived experience.*

My identity as a gay rabbinical student also informs *how* I think about Torah, family dynamics, alienation and the potential for a transformed Jewish community and a tradition that embraces each person's experience as pivotal to the unfolding narrative of our people. Reflecting on the American legal tradition but no less relevant to the Jewish tradition, the late legal scholar Robert Cover writes: "Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live." So too with the way we view ourselves shaping the contours of our communities. In knowing my identity and lived experience, I will be informed by the tradition as it was lived, as we live it, and as it will come to be lived. How will you be more of yourself, and what gifts will you bring into the cadences of our tradition? In these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I am reminded of the Hassidic story about Reb Zusya:

The students of Reb Zusya came to their teacher, who lay dying. They were surprised to see him trembling with fear. "Why are you afraid of death?" his students asked. "In your life, have you not been as righteous as Moshe himself?" "When I stand before the throne of judgment," Reb Zusya answered, "I will not be asked, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Moshe?' I will be asked instead, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Reb Zusya?'"

How will you remember to be more of you?

The words of our parashah return: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. Ask your parents, and they will inform you. Your elders, they will tell you." We live with stories that force us to reach down into the dark expanses of ourselves so that we can

be more of ourselves. The shofar calls to each of us during the Yamim Noraim to listen within to the soul soar, to be attuned to the still small voice that names our brokenness and wholeness-- to be more of ourselves as Eda would say. Our mahzor brings a selection from Pesikta de Rav Kahana, a collection of homilies from the fifth and sixth centuries known as midrash aggadah, which comments on the following verse from Psalm 51, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a contrite and broken heart." Rabbi Abba bar Judan said: What God regards as unfit for sacrifice in an animal, God holds fit in a human being. An animal that is blind or broken or maimed is unfit for sacrifice but a human being who has a broken and contrite heart is a fit offering to God." Let us bring these offerings forward and taste redemption. If we are not struggling to access our lived experience- no easy task- we cannot fully enter into the intensity of this season of teshuvah. We cannot possibly return to who we are or consider what we want to become without first acknowledging the brokenness and wholeness that dwell within us.

Like Moshe accompanying the people in our parashah, our experience is what accompanies us into the Yamim Noraim. That experience is reflected in our mahzor, which includes an innovative section entitled "Prayers of Brokenness and Wholeness," from which we read on Rosh Hashanah. These prayers include old and new selections for all kinds of healing, beginning with our own, the healing of loved ones, and expanding outward to our communities and country. In this section, the mahzor reminds us that the shofar is sounded in two distinct ways. One is a tragic cry through the wailing of the teruot and gasps of pain of the sh'varim. The other is a long, single shout, a cry of triumph of the tekiah. Like our bodies, I believe the shofar is one instrument and yet it produces many blasts. As we hear the sound of the shofar this year, to which sounds from within must each of us listen? Which ones are we hearing, and which ones are we blocking out?

Reflecting on her sabbatical and the significance of teshuvah, Rabbi Toba Spitzer writes,

We tend to take care of ourselves in service to something else— to be able to work harder, to be able to live longer, but for what? We do teshuvah not to get somewhere else. We do teshuvah to be able to be here, right here, in the fullness of this moment and the fullness of ourselves. Teshuvah means to come back— to this. There is really nowhere else to go. So what could be of more importance than nurturing those aspects of ourselves that help us become present...?

As we enter deeper into the Yamim Noraim, it is my prayer that we open ourselves to the call of the shofar to be more of ourselves, to remember our brokenness and wholeness how and where they unfold in our lived experience. May God journey with us and bless the work of our hearts and hands in renewing such glorious Divine creation.