

Kol Nidrei 5776

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Congregation Shaare Tefilla

Dallas, Texas

Over the past few weeks, my good friend, colleague and fellow Rochesterian Rabbi Adam Scheier, Rabbi of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim in Montreal, has done “pop-up Rabbi” sessions throughout the city of Montreal. Contacting coffee shops in advance, he would set up a table and put a sign on it that said, “Pop-Up Rabbi- Ask me Anything!” The questions people asked were extraordinary. Some asked very personal and even very private questions, for example- “I’ve reconnected and re-fallen in love with my childhood sweetheart – the problem is, we’re both married to other people. What should I do?” Others have asked ritual questions, like “How do I make the al chet’s personal?” On Wednesday afternoon before Rosh Hashanah, he set up shop outside a Starbucks from 1:30 – 3:30 pm. He brought along with him small honey sticks with a sticker attached to them with Shana Tova wishes, along with his contact information, and he gave those honey sticks out to passersby. Joining him was the synagogue’s membership engagement professional, to take down details and facilitate follow-up. It is exhausting to stand outside for two hours, even in the much more manageable Montreal fall, so at 3:26 pm, the membership engagement professional said, “Let’s go!” Rabbi Scheier insisted on staying four more minutes – maybe someone would come by looking for them. At 3:29, they picked up to leave, at which point Rabbi Scheier noticed that they had one more honey stick. He

looked around. Right in front of where they were standing, there was a bus stop, and there was a group of people standing there, waiting for the bus. He walked over to the person closest to them- she was a young woman, maybe in her early 20s, dressed like a student and displaying multiple piercings. As Rabbi Scheier put it, she was “not your classic shul material.” But he walked over and said, “The Jewish New Year is next week. Here is a honey stick. It represents sweetness. I hope your year is sweet and wonderful, full of blessings and happiness.”

She took the honey stick, examined it, and started to cry. He really had no idea what to say or do. Then she looked up at him and said, “You have no idea how much this means to me. I know what the Jewish New Year is. I grew up in the Belzer community. I went to Beis Yaakov. Yiddish was my first language. I was bullied a lot in school, and I left the community a few years ago. My birthday is erev Rosh Hashana; my middle name is Zissel. This sweetness means so much to me. It reminds me of home. A gut gebenschte yahr!¹”

Here we are- it is Yom Kippur and we are standing before God once again, atoning for the very same sins, it seems, that we were last year. This year, we were just as gossipy, just as avaricious, just as thoughtless and just as ignorant as we were last year, and somewhere in the back of our minds- and hopefully in the front- we must be asking ourselves the most important question of the day. How can we stop? Is there some kind of magic formula that will allow us to avoid the counterproductive behaviors that we simply repeat? Is there any way to put sin out of business?

¹ Related in a communication of September 11, 2015

As a matter of fact, there is. There is a Mishnah in Pirkei Avos provides us with a fail safe method for avoiding sin.

עקביא בן מהללאל אומר, הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עברה.

דע, מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון.

Akavya ben Mahalalel says that if you look at three things, you will never come to sin: Know where you came from, where you are going to and in front of whom you will give a full accounting. This sounds really nice and profound, but if you think about it, it does not work. “Know where you came from”- we come from our parents, we know that. “Where we are going”- we know that at some point, we pray after 120 years, we will all pass from this world. And we know that it is God in front of whom we will give an accounting. None of this is anything new; we knew all this last year, and none of it prevented us from sinning. What does this Mishnah teach us?

I’d like to suggest that far from being a simple and ineffective prescription for the avoidance of sin, this Mishnah is a nothing less than a roadmap for an essential component of a fulfilled life-spiritual ambition.

דע מאין באת- know where you came from. Certainly, this refers to our background, our families, our childhood communities and our ethnic origins, all of which are on our minds especially on the High Holidays. That’s why my friend’s new ex-Chassidic acquaintance became so emotional; she had a strong sense of where she came from, even though her journey had taken her far away from there. But “where you come from” is not just about geography and

upbringing- it is about people who have influenced and inspired us along the way. I think all of us recognize the importance of this; throughout the Rabbinic interviewing process I went through this past year, one of the questions I was asked by virtually every community in which I applied was “Who are the people you look to for inspiration? Who are the Jewish leaders who have left an impression on you?” But that is not just a question to ask your Rabbi- on Yom Kippur, it’s a question to ask ourselves. Who are the people that have shaped us, and whose example we wish to emulate? What are the qualities they possess or possessed that make us admire or revere them? It can be a great Jewish leader or a teacher. It can be a relative or a friend. It can be a person whose parenting skills we admire, whose spirituality and observance we respect, or a person who thinks about serious issues and is involved with worthy causes with sincerity and passion. Being a spiritually ambitious person means attaching ourselves to quality people and drawing upon their example.

But we don’t have to look outward for sources of spiritual ambition- it lies within us as well; being a spiritually ambitious person means that we always know where “we have come from”, as we draw from reservoirs of inspiration formed by our life experiences. In the summer of 2001, Shoshana Hayman Greenbaum and husband Shmuel and her husband went to Israel, so she could participate in a course in Jerusalem as part of her master’s program at YU’s Azrieli School of Jewish Education. One August day, she went out for lunch to eat her favorite food- pizza- at Sbarro’s, and that was when she met her tragic and untimely demise during the Sbarro’s bombing; she was five months pregnant at the time. After her death, stories began pouring in about her remarkable kindness, her pedagogical skills, her infectious smile and her love of life, but there was one story that stood out. Shoshana had a hunter green wooden box on which she

painted pencil thin white flowers, and inscribed a *passuk*- one that we say each month in Hallel (Tehillim 118: 22)- אָבֶן מֵאֲסוּר הַבּוֹנִים הִיְתָה לְרֵאשׁ פְּנֵה - the stone the builders rejected became the foundation stone. In the box were mementos, essays and poems she wrote during various challenging periods in her life, and there were many such periods. Notably, Shoshana had been single for a long time; in a graduating class of 32 women at YULA, she was one of the last to get married. She went to dozens of weddings, wore all manner of bridesmaid dresses, baked numerous cakes for engagement parties, but she just couldn't find the right person herself, until she was introduced to her husband Shmuel. She was 30, and the very last item she placed in the box before her tragic death was her Ketubah. "Most people try to remove the rocks that block their way," reflected Esther Stauber, a confidant of Shoshana's from the time they taught together at Hebrew Academy of Long Beach in New York. "Not Shoshana...Shoshana would look at these pieces of her life and recall how she had used them as a cornerstone for growth."² דַּע מֵאִין בָּאת -the key to living a successful spiritual life is to take the challenges we have experienced and triumphs we have enjoyed and use them as stepping stones to personal and spiritual growth.

It is not enough, however, just to know where you come from- the Mishnah tells us that we must also know where we are going. As Yaakov leaves his father in law Lavan's house, the Torah tells us

וַיֵּשֶׂא יַעֲקֹב רַגְלָיו וַיִּלְךְ אַרְצָה בְּנֵי קָדֶם.

² <http://www.mishpacha.com/Browse/Article/1393/On-the-Wings-of-a-Dove>

Yaakov lifted up his feet, and went toward the land of the eastern people. The language in the verse is a little awkward; how else would Yaakov have traveled if not for “lifting up his feet”? Plenty of other biblical characters traveled before him, and no one is described this way. What is the meaning of this cumbersome phrase? The Sforno explained that this verse teaches us an important lesson about Yaakov, but about life in general. Yaakov lifted his own feet because he moved with a sense of destiny and purpose. He had an agenda and he knew what was needed to make it happen. In a speech he delivered several years ago, former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks described his first encounter with a man *he* looked to for inspiration, a man who shaped his worldview profoundly. Lord Sacks was a student at the University of Cambridge when he had his very first *yechidus* with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He had travelled by Greyhound bus, non-stop, for 72 hours from the home of a relative in Los Angeles, and he was prepared with numerous intellectual and philosophical questions, all of which the Rebbe answered. But then the Rebbe began to ask *him* questions. Listen to Lord Sacks’s account, delivered several years ago at the Kinus Hashluchim, the annual conference of Chabad emissaries each fall in New York.

Pretend I am reading this in a magisterial British accent.

How many Jewish students are in Cambridge? How many get involved in Jewish life?

What are you doing to bring other people in?

Now, I hadn’t come to become a Shliach [Chabad-Lubavitch emissary]. I’d come to ask a few simple questions, and all of a sudden he was challenging me. So I did the English thing. You know, the English can construct sentences like nobody else, you know? They can construct more complex excuses for doing nothing, than anyone else on earth.

So I started the sentence, "In the situation in which I find myself..." – and the Rebbe did something which I think was quite unusual for him, he actually stopped me in mid-sentence. He says, "Nobody finds themselves in a situation; you put yourself in a situation. And if you put yourself in that situation, you can put yourself in another situation."

Few people lived their lives with more of a sense of purpose and a sense of mission than the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose words were seared in the mind of his interlocutor for the rest of his life. *No one finds themselves in a situation*; in order to be spiritually successful, in order to lead meaningful and Godly lives, we have to develop spiritual ambitions, and not just lead lives buffeted by circumstance and tamed into submission by the 40% of our daily activities that arise from habit³. In our moments of candor, we all know there are many areas in which we are woefully deficient, in which we would like to improve. So what is it for us? Perhaps it is to keep Shabbos better, or learn more about it. Is it to put on Tefillin or do so more regularly? Maybe it is to daven more frequently, to do so with more feeling or with a minyan. Is it to add some more learning to our daily lives or to be more involved with outreach? In the realm of the interpersonal or intrapersonal, maybe we want to be more attentive and considerate to our spouse or children, to lose our temper less frequently or exercise more. Hopefully it is all of these, but in order to make them happen, we need to have a *plan* for making them happen. Simply wanting to be a better, more spiritual person won't make it so. Only when we have a plan will we truly know where we are going.

³ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140808111931.htm>- I am grateful to Rabbi Efreim Goldberg of the Boca Raton Synagogue who quoted these statistics in his Rosh Hashanah sermon.

But as important as it is to create a vision for ourselves based on the people and experiences that shaped us, and to plan for how we will actualize that vision, it is especially important to realize that we will have to provide a final accounting-*דין וחשבון*. The Vilna Gaon explains that two words used in this sentence are apparently repetitive, but actually quite different. *דין* refers to an accounting of the numerous times we have done wrong. *חשבון* refers to an accounting of what we could have been doing instead, and who we could have become. Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, known as the Netziv, was the Rosh Yeshiva of the illustrious Volozhin Yeshiva in Lithuania, known as the Mother of Yeshivos for it was the first self contained Yeshiva, spawning many other Yeshiva dynasties that are still thriving. In addition to his duties at the Yeshiva, the Netziv was a prolific writer. One of his most famous works is the *Haamek She'eila*, a commentary on a work called the *She'iltot* written by eighth century Talmudist Rav Achai Gaon. The story is told that after its publication, he threw a party at the Yeshiva, to which he invited his students, and told them the following story. "When I was a young child, I was not a particularly talented student. I was certainly not intellectually gifted, and was not particularly attentive either. I just had no interest in my studies- I preferred to play than to learn. One evening, my parents were meeting with my *melamed* (Torah teacher); I was hiding in the next room so I could hear what they were talking about. I heard him say to my parents, 'You are wasting my time and your money. Naftali will never amount to anything. Better you should just teach him a trade.' I overheard this, and it shook me to the very core of my being. I was terrified that I would never amount to anything, and I resolved, from that day forward, to apply myself in my studies. Now I ask you. What would have happened had I never overheard my *melamed* say that? I will tell you what would have happened. I would have become a

cobbler, perhaps. There is, of course, no shame in being a cobbler- it is an honorable way to earn a living and that is how I would have lived. I would have said Tehillim every single day after davening with a minyan. I might even have reviewed the Parsha every week. I would be an excellent cobbler and would treat my clients with respect and scrupulous integrity. And after 120 years, I would go up to the Heavenly Court and they would praise me for the simple, yet honorable life I led, and I would merit a *lichtigen gan Eden* just for that. But then they would show me a set of books. I would look at the ministering angels with a dumbfounded look and ask what they are. I would never have seen them, let alone learn from them! The angels would have said, ‘These are the five volumes of a commentary on the Torah you could have written, called *Haamek Davar*.’ And then they would take out another few volumes. Again, I would ask what they are, and they would say, ‘This is your commentary on the *She’iltot* called *Ha’amek She’eilah*.’ And the scene would repeat itself, with yet another set of books, and once again I would ask what they are and they would tell me, ‘these are the halachic responsa you could have written, called *Meishiv Davar*.’ And on and on this scene would repeat itself- so many books I could have written but didn’t. All that would have happened if I had never heard my *melamed* speak to my parents- but I did, and I did write all those books. After I pass, I’m sure the Heavenly Court will call me to task for many things, but this won’t be it.” לפני מי אתה עתיד ליתן דין -רוחשבון there is no limit to what we can accomplish if we have spiritual ambitions and a plan to actualize them, but that is the only way we will succeed- and if we are allowed to enjoy our successes, we must be held accountable when we fail to meet our full potential.

As we begin Yom Kippur, let us think about these questions: Who and what are our formative influences? How will we develop spiritual ambitions and actualize them? What will our accounting show of us? Let us answer them on this day, on which we plumb the recesses of our souls, and emerge with a true sense of spiritual direction.