

Heshbon Hanefesh: Taking Stock of Our Relationships
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The fable of the scorpion and the tortoise as told by the late David Rakoff: [David Rakoff was a social anthropologist of postmodern life. He was a prize-winning essayist and humorist who often wrote for *This American Life* where this story aired.¹ He died in August.]

“The scorpion was hamstrung, his tail all aquiver;

just how would he manage to get across the river?

“The water’s so deep,” he observed with a sigh,

which pricked at the ears of the tortoise nearby.

“Well why don’t you swim?” asked the slow-moving fellow,

“unless you’re afraid. I mean, what are you, yellow?”

“It isn’t a matter of fear or of whim,”

said the scorpion,

“but that I don’t know how to swim.”

“Ah, forgive me. I didn’t mean to be glib when

I said that. I figured you were an amphibian.”

“No offense taken,” the scorpion replied,

“but how about you help me to reach the far side?

You swim like a dream, and you have what I lack.

Let’s say you take me across on your back?”

“I’m really not sure that’s the best thing to do,”

said the tortoise, “now that I see that it’s you.

¹ *This American Life*, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/389/transcript>. September 11, 2009.

You've a less than ideal reputation preceding:
there's talk of your victims all poisoned and bleeding.
You're the scorpion — and how can I say this — but, well,
I just don't feel safe with you riding my shell.”
The scorpion replied, “What would killing you prove?
We'd both drown, so tell me: how would that behoove
me to basically die at my very own hand
when all I desire is to be on dry land?”
The tortoise considered the scorpion's defense.
When he gave it some thought, it made perfect sense.
The niggling voice in his mind he ignored,
and he swam to the bank and called out: “Climb aboard!”
But just a few moments from when they set sail,
the scorpion lashed out with his venomous tail.
The tortoise too late understood that he'd blundered
when he felt his flesh stabbed and his carapace sundered.
As he fought for his life, he said, “tell me why
you have done this! For now we will surely both die!”
“I don't know!” cried the scorpion. “You never should trust
a creature like me because poison I must!
I'd claim some remorse or at least some compunction,
but I just can't help it; my form is my function.
You thought I'd behave like my cousin, the crab,

but unlike him, it is but my nature to stab.”

The tortoise expired with one final quiver.

And then both of them sank, swallowed up by the river.”

As they both go to their watery grave, I can't help but think, couldn't there have been a different, more uplifting ending to this tale? The tortoise is trusting, and the scorpion can't help but act on his nature even if it means his demise. How terribly fatalistic.

But this is more than just a sad ending; it is, to borrow from the Greeks, or perhaps Shakespeare, a tragic one, in which innate qualities, if not destiny, seem to doom these two characters, whose fate, like that of Hamlet and Laertes, Romeo and Juliet, Oedipus and Jocasta is so bound together...

Perhaps some of you are thinking that we should give the scorpion a pass here. This pitiable arachnid can hardly be said to have a choice in matters of biology. Is he not right to proclaim “poison I must” and “my form *is* my function?”

The story's conclusion compels us to think about our reflexive patterns of behavior. How often have we blamed our behaviors on innate and immutable qualities?” and “aren't we supposed to embrace who we are?”

But our story doesn't have to end like the scorpion and the tortoise. The message of Yom Kippur is that we human beings are fundamentally different from animals in that we do not have to resign ourselves to being enslaved to our coarsest or most habitual impulses. We are not the scorpion who can only act on his animal instincts. We can make a different choice.

Human beings from the moment of creation were instilled with two inclinations—good and bad—the *yetzer hatov* and the other for the *yetzer hara*. The rabbis maintain that the Torah hints at this duality early in Genesis: “God formed Adam from the dust of the earth.” (Genesis 2:7) The word formed—*va'yitzar*—is spelled with two *yuds*. Since nothing is accidental in scripture, when a misspelling occurs in the Torah, the rabbis take note. In the case of the curious spelling of *va'yitzar*, the rabbis say the duplicate *yuds* represent our two polar inclinations: One *yud* for the *yetzer hatov* and the other for the *yetzer hara*.² Thus, from the outset of Genesis, Jews learn that we are not inherently evil or good. We have free will to choose our behavior. But God knew from the outset that it's impossible even for the best of us not to stumble, so before the world was created, God created *teshuvah*—repentance.³ God knew that we would need a way to make amends when we slipped up. Therefore the concept of repentance was prepared in advance of human beings. It was built into the very fabric of creation.

² Talmud Brachot 61a.

³ Talmud Pesachim 54a.

On Rosh Hashanah I presented a *Heshbon Hanefesh* -- an accounting -- of the state of our souls and our country. Last night, I reflected on the state of the Jewish people. This Yom Kippur morning is our time to reflect on the harmful patterns we can fall into in our relationships with each other.

Each year we read in our Yom Kippur liturgy:

For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.⁴

It's well and good for us to be here reflecting on ourselves and our lives and confessing our wrongdoings to God, but the Mishnah reminds us that this does not replace making amends with those we hurt. But it's often hard.

For many of us, the hardest words to utter are I'm sorry. Of course there are other reasons that it's difficult to say "I'm sorry," or that "I'm sorry" isn't enough. Sometimes the words "I'm sorry" ring hollow because trust has eroded in a relationship. And it is never enough in relationships that have grown unhealthy or toxic and need to end.

Sometimes our change in behavior can influence another person to change, but we should never fool ourselves into thinking we can make others change. Each of us can only take care of our own behavior, repent and make amends for what we have done, and adjust our expectations of another. How many times have we thought, if I just change the way I say something to this person, then surely he/she will change only to have them persist in their negative behaviors?

When I was younger, I believed that traumatic events transformed those that survived them—that a brush with death or some other personal crisis would impel people to look in the mirror, acknowledge the preciousness and precariousness of life and then take a vow to act differently in the future, perhaps being more charitable, spending more time with loved ones or simply caring more about other people. Then one day, while I was in school in New York, my theory came face to face with the reality that many people fail to make fundamental changes in how they think and act, even in the face of a profound crisis. In the experience I'm relating to you, a couple's adult daughter had been exhibiting destructive behaviors. She was in one unhealthy relationship after another and wasn't doing anything constructive with her life. Her parents saw that she was in a bad and potentially dangerous situation in her life, but did nothing to intervene. Then her boyfriend was put in jail for dealing drugs. The parents panicked, and with some cajoling from family members, resolved to get their daughter the help she needed. But as weeks passed and everyone got back to their routines, the parents' resolve eroded. They rationalized that now that the boyfriend was out of the picture, their daughter would be fine, even though she herself showed no signs of change. What I learned is that for most of us it's easier to interpret a situation to fit previously held beliefs than to change our behavior or thinking. Most human beings are experts at rationalizing our failure to

⁴ Mishnah Yoma 8:8-9.

change our behaviors. Only an internal desire to change, not some external force or person pushing us, can impel us to grow from our experiences.

Yom Kippur is an opportunity, but only if we seize it. It is an opportunity to look critically at ourselves and evaluate how we interact with others. How often do we rationalize our behavior or blame it on someone else? When have we said, “If only he/she would act differently, then I would be more reasonable?” How often have we simply chosen to ignore an issue in a relationship because we hoped it would just go away on its own? To whom do we need to say we are truly sorry? How can we break the negative cycle of interaction that we can fall into with our family, our friends, our colleagues?

Maimonides lays out the following steps of *teshuvah*—repentance:⁵

Recognition, Renunciation, Confession, Reconciliation, Resolution. First, we need to admit to ourselves that we’ve done something wrong and reject this behavior. Then we tell the person we hurt that we feel badly about how we treated them. This can pave the path to reconciliation. Finally, in order not to fall back into the same pattern of behavior we must resolve to act differently in the future.

The ultimate test of true *teshuvah*: When we are in similar situation, we don’t the same thing again

The Torah is not exactly the best guide here, at least not if we’re looking for exemplary interpersonal behavior. The Book of Genesis is filled with dysfunctional families. Rather than brotherly love, the relationship between the first brothers, Cain and Abel, is riven with jealousy. Leah and Rachel don’t prove that sisters can do much better. Sarah has Abraham cast out his mistress Hagar because of Sarah’s desire to protect Isaac’s birthright from Ishmael. Jacob and Esau’s fighting begins *in utero* and is never fully resolved. Jacob’s sons don’t fare much better, feigning their brother Joseph’s death and selling him into slavery.

Then along comes Judah.

A flawed character to be sure, but one who exhibits real growth. He persuades his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. He impregnates his daughter-in-law, Tamar, after refusing to give her his third son in marriage. But Judah also has a moment of true *teshuvah*—repentance. After the goblet that Joseph hid in Benjamin’s bag is discovered and the brothers are returned to Joseph for this apparent theft, Judah stands up for Benjamin and makes an impassioned speech to the vizier of Egypt, who, unbeknownst to Judah, is really his brother, Joseph. “Do not imprison, Benjamin,” Judah pleads with Joseph, “Take me instead.” At that moment Joseph sees that Judah is not prepared to allow another brother to be thrown into a dungeon and enslaved. Confronted with a situation similar to when he sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, Judah makes a different

⁵ Maimonides Hilchot Teshuva.

choice. He protects Benjamin. When Joseph sees Judah's act of *teshuvah*, Joseph breaks down in tears. The brothers are reconciled.⁶

Like all of us, Judah is far from perfect, but he grows. When confronted with the opportunity to make the same mistake again, he makes a different choice. The name Judah contains within it the letters of the Hebrew verb "to be." Judah is not a static being but a developing person, and he holds out hope for all of us, his descendants, that we can grow as well.

And so we try, imperfectly at best, knowing that we'll slip back into our old patterns, but with the intention that when we stumble, we can get up and try again. One of the most helpful teachings that my meditation teacher Rabbi Sheila Weinberg taught me is that "FallDownGetUp" is one word. Our life doesn't have to be a broken record, repeating continuously well-worn patterns of corrosive behavior. We will make mistakes again and again, but they shouldn't weaken our resolve to continue trying.

David Rakoff doesn't end the essay in which he tells the tale of the scorpion and the tortoise with their drowning. Instead, he continues with this musing on the nature of relationships.

"So, what can we learn from their watery ends?
Is there some lesson on how to be friends?
I think what it means is that, central to living
a life that is good is a life that's forgiving.
We're creatures of contact. Regardless of whether
we kiss or we wound, still, we must come together.
Though it may spell destruction, we still ask for more,
since it beats staying dry -- *but so lonely* -- on shore;
so we make ourselves open, while knowing full well
it's essentially saying, 'Please, come pierce my shell.'"

Our need and desire to be in relationships brings out the best and worst in us. Our relationships make us vulnerable, but they are what make life worthwhile. O God, as we pray for you to forgive us today, teach us to be forgiving of others and ourselves. Give us the wisdom to look within and be honest with ourselves about how we have hurt others, and guide us as we navigate the often arduous path of *teshuvah*. As we fall down despite our best intentions to behave differently with our loved ones, be there to pick us up so that we might try again. We know you don't expect perfection from us, God, but a commitment to continue to grow. Strengthen our faith in the possibility that we really can change and strengthen our relationships in the coming year.

⁶ Genesis 44:18-30.