

## TEACH YOUR CHILD FROM A CORRECTED TORAH

Yom Kippur Morning 5767

Last spring, as we were beginning the process of a year-long Torah repair project, I embarked on a search through the literature for a catchy pull-quote we would be able to use in our campaign. In the process I came across a fascinating if somewhat perplexing text. It comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Pesachim*. Rabbi Akiba said to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, “When you teach your child, teach him from a *corrected* scroll.” (Pes. 112a) What an odd notion, I thought. Why would anyone suggest that you should teach your child from an *imperfect* scroll, a *sefer Torah* that had been flawed and subsequently corrected? Wouldn't it be better to teach your child from a perfect scroll, one that was executed without error? Isn't the ideal model—*ideal*? Indeed, so responds Raba (and some say Rabbi Mesharshya): “You should teach him from a *new* scroll.”

Of course it doesn't take long to figure out that these guys are engaging in metaphor. For Raba (or Mesharshya), the new scroll symbolizes the child, as the Talmudic text continues: “For once an error has entered, it remains.” And while it is a worthy teaching—that so much of who we become is rooted in our youth—the response to Akiba's metaphor misses the point. Akiba isn't talking about the child, he's talking about the parent. Or the teacher. The source of the teaching. For Akiba, the “corrected” scroll is us.

It is, to my thinking, a wonderful insight. We have so much more to teach from our failings, from our mistakes than we do from our successes. It's a classic lesson in didactics. To be sure, there is so much more to be learned from trial and error than from simply giving the student the correct answer. How often have we told our parents, “Let me make my own mistakes. Don't tell me what to do. Don't tell me how to do it. I'll learn on my own.” And, in truth, experience is a great teacher, except for Akiba the lesson is not to be learned from the student's mistakes but rather from the teacher's.

If we are honest about what we do here this day, we come to Yom Kippur with the burden of our failures. If we are serious about what we do here this day, we enter this sacred space with *teshuvah* on our mind, with the desire to repair that which is broken, to grow as human beings. If we are earnest about what we do here this day, we are prepared to do a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*—a sincere examination of who we are and what we are not.

Conventional wisdom says that a central part of the goal to be *good* is not to do *bad* things. And, of course, this is true. But it is also impossible to do on the whole. That is the point of the Garden of Eden story. For that matter, that is the point of every story in the Bible. From Adam and Eve's inability to follow a single command to not eat of a tree, to Moses' temper, to Abraham's willingness to pass his wife off as his sister, to David's lust for Batsheva—not a single persona can be presented as anything more than...human.

Everybody has got *meshugas*. This is the Jewish way of saying that we're a little less than we think, that our elevator never quite gets to the top floor. And that's alright. Otherwise there would be no need for Yom Kippur.

So much of our internal struggles arise from our disappointments—in ourselves and in others. Among the greatest epiphanies of my life was realizing—maybe sometime in my early

twenties—that my parents, before they were parents, were just *people*. They had fears and desires and failures. Just like me. They were just doing the best they can. (My second epiphany was realizing that I wasn't much different from them.) Richard Carlson, in his book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, writes, "So often we are immobilized by the slightest criticism. We treat it like an emergency, and defend ourselves as if we were in a battle. In truth, however, criticism is nothing more than an observation by another person about us, our actions, or the way we think about something, that doesn't match the vision we have of ourselves. Big deal!" And, of course, they might be right. Nu? So much of our emotional burdens are rooted in a sense of failure, but of what? That we're not perfect?

The first step in the process is to get over the need to be perfect; besides, it's not all that it's cracked up to be.

Years ago there was a *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy says, "I have examined my life and found it to be perfect. And so I am going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal and then I will give a brilliant acceptance speech, after which I will greet myself in the receiving line. And then I will serve myself refreshments." And then in the final panel she says, kind of wistfully, "When you are perfect, I guess you have to do everything yourself—and that's no fun."

In a same way comes a simple yet profound story from medieval Hebrew literature about a king who is trying to impress a woman. "Do you know how rich I am?" he says. But she's not impressed. So he persists. "Do you know how many servants I have? Do you know how much land I control? Do you know how envied I am in the world?" But nothing worked. Disillusioned, he sat down and mumbled under his breath (but just loud enough for her to hear), "This has been such a hard day: my feet hurt, I have such a headache, and so many decisions. What am I going to do?" Whereupon the woman turns to him and says, "I'm sorry to hear about your problems. You look like you need a friend. Can I help?"

Our imperfections, or human-ness, are hardly our downfall; rather they are our saving grace. Our failings are our doorways to growth, our conduits to transformation.

The second step in the process, then, is to take responsibility for our imperfections. To take ownership of them. Embrace them. Even love them.

My friend and teacher Rabbi Jack Bloom says that we all have (at least) two *selves*. It's not that we're schizophrenic or multiple personality, but rather that our personalities are more complex than we're usually willing to admit. Jack says that, in his case, there's a part of him that he really doesn't like, and when it comes out he's not a very nice person. But rather than ignore this dark side, rather than pretend it doesn't exist, he names it ("Jackie"), recognizes it and when it appears he responds accordingly. Jack knows that "Jackie" will never go away. It's not merely in him (as if it could be compartmentalized and discarded). It *is* him. It's a part of his whole. Jung called it the *Shadow-Self*. And everyone has one.

Rabbi Bunam would teach that the reason we all have two pockets is so that we can keep a different piece of paper in each. On one is inscribed, "For my sake was the world created" while on the other is the text, "I am but dust and ashes." We reach into the pocket according to the need. If we're feeling sure of ourselves, then we reach into the pocket reminding us of our limitations, and when we're down on ourselves we pull out the inscription that makes sure we not lose sight of the fact that God believes in us. Either way, we are both. Both texts tell the

truth about who we are. And more to the point, meaningful life must embrace both sides.

Rabbi Shira Stern, who was attending the same seminar when Jack Bloom made his presentation about the multiple selves, reminded us of the *midrash* of how it was that in the wilderness the Israelites placed into the Ark of the Covenant both the tablets of the Ten Commandments *and* the broken fragments of the first set tablets that Moses had shattered in rage. And not merely did they keep the broken tablets, but they carried them with them wherever they went. The broken pieces are as much who we are as are the parts that are whole. “Sometimes,” Shira suggested, “we face God with our lives pieced together, and sometimes, we just offer the pieces, because that's all we have that's sacred.” And to this I would add, as I think would Rabbi Akiba, it is the “pieces” that have the potential to be the most sacred.

The Maggid of Dubno, one of the great teachers of 19th Century Hasidism, would tell a parable of king who had an extraordinary gem. A breathtaking sapphire. It was the king's most precious possession. Every morning when he got up he would go to look at it before beginning his daily activities; and every evening, before going to bed, he would look at it again. It brought him enormous pleasure.

One day he awoke to notice that the sapphire had...something. Something wasn't right. It didn't look the same, somehow. At first he thought it was an illusion. He took it out of its case to view it from another angle; maybe it was a shadow, or a reflection? Perhaps it was a cobweb. Alas, it was a scratch. Running from top to bottom. An extraordinary imperfection that could not be denied. Immediately he called his advisors and ordered them to seek out the finest gem cutters in the kingdom. Surely one of them would be able to remove the flaw.

Most, of course, realized that it would be impossible to perfect such an imperfection. Once it was there—it was there. Some bravely suggested alternatives. Like cutting the sapphire in half, right along its fault line. Or filling it in with a transparent resin. “No one will ever be able to tell,” one expert said. But the king refused to even consider such ridiculous notions. “I want my gem back,” the King bellowed.

Then came yet another specialist. He examined the sapphire. Looking at it from every possible angle. Holding it up to the light, turning it—this way and that—at a distance as well as up close with his monocle. “Yes,” he said, “I will be able to repair the stone.” The King was incredulous. *You can fix it?* “Yes. Yes I can. But you must allow me to take it with me and let me work on it entirely in private. I must have no distractions. No interruptions. Not even the King may interfere while I work. You may guard the door to my home, if you fear I shall try to flee with the gem. But I must be left entirely alone. And if, when I am finished, you are displeased, you may do with me as you wish.” What could the King do? No one else could even offer the slightest ray of hope. Reluctantly, the King agreed, and the man took the gem—under guard—back to his small home.

One week passed. Another. Not a word from the man. Then, as the month was nearing its end, the gem cutter knocked on his door. The guard opened it up. “I am ready,” he said. “The sapphire is finished.” Soon word spread throughout the Kingdom. People of all stations dropped what they were doing and flocked to the palace. Trumpets were sounded. The court singers were chanting. And there sat the King upon his throne. Slowly the man approached the King, the gem hidden from sight in a velvet bag. “You have repaired my sapphire?” the King asked. “I have,” said the man. He handed the bag to the King. Slowly the King removed the gem. You could see he was apprehensive. It seemed as if he was afraid to look at it. After all,

how can anyone remove such an imperfection? Then he looked. Immediately his brow furrowed. His eyes narrowed. Indeed, the scratch was still there. He had not removed it at all. Yet it was the most extraordinary thing the King had ever seen. It was even *more* beautiful than before. The gem cutter had carved a magnificent full-flowered rose, replete with miniature leaves and thorns, right into the side of the sapphire. And the scratch? He had used it as the foundation, the *stem* of the rose....

And this is the third step of the process, to have the courage and the strength to transform the blemishes of one's soul into something beautiful, something truly...human.

You all know the Canfield-Hansen *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, an amazing collection of stories and anecdotes and teachings designed, as the covers of their books state, "to open the heart and rekindle the spirit." And that they do. I confess I find it hard to read through any of their books and not be moved to tears. Because the stories touch upon the weaknesses of our souls and our grace-filled human capacity to transcend what Hannah Arendt calls *The Human Condition*.

Now I admit that some of the titles in this series can sometimes stretch the imagination. (Personally I'm waiting for the *Chicken Soup for the Obsessive-Compulsive Soul*.) But as I was walking through the *Self-Help* section of Barnes and Noble the other day, and came across *Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul*, I knew I had found the right source for this morning's teaching. After all, who better to teach us about soul-correction than those forced by the community to face their own failures?

I want to end then by sharing just a few of the insights of these human beings who have struggled and persevered. These are the words of individuals who have spent the better part of their adult lives correcting their own personal scrolls. And their teachings are as sacred as anything written on the *sefer Torah*. Indeed, as our rabbis suggest, we each have a Torah within us to teach.

Lou Torok writes to his son:

*It's hard being a man and facing the truth. But when you make a mistake, you are the only one who can correct it. It is up to you to do everything you can to undo any harm or pain you have caused... A real man does not blame others for his own behavior. A real man does not think everything in life is free. He understands that there is always a price to pay for every action... Be a man and learn from your own mistakes.*

Similarly, Daniel Bayse reflected on the lessons he learned in prison:

*I learned that true freedom is not freedom from temptation or freedom from prison. True freedom is having the power to stop doing things that get us into trouble. One of the primary differences between adults and children is the ability to act on reason instead of emotional feelings. For me, attaining the freedom to become 'somebody' meant I had to make a choice not to follow my own anger and bitterness. I had to ignore my inner voice saying, 'You're worthless,' and replace it with an empowering voice saying, 'You're worthwhile.'*

But perhaps most powerful for me was the story, as recounted by Billy Graham, of a man who had been incarcerated in prison for eight years. The week before his release he wrote a letter to his wife and children:

*I'm getting paroled next week. I've been in here almost eight years. I know you don't want me to come home, but maybe you would have some love left in your heart. I'm going to be on the*

10:12 a.m. bus. I'll be passing by the house. And if you will welcome me, put a yellow sheet or yellow ribbons outside. Then I'll know that you'll receive me. If not, I'll just pass on by... because I know how ashamed you must be of me having been in prison.

On his way home the bus it stopped at a university and took on a group of students. Before too long they got to talking with this man and he told him his story and about the letter he had written to his family. Soon a nervous anticipation filled the bus as it neared his home. Would there be yellow sheets or ribbons to welcome him home? Or would the trees be bare?

When the bus turned the corner and started down his street, they could see a half mile away nothing but yellow—yellow sheets in the trees, yellow sheets and ribbons all over the house. And as the bus stopped, the man hurried off and fell into the arms of his wife and children to the wild applause of the students.

Such is the fourth step of the process: The completion of the cycle, to muster the strength to face the other and humbly seek—and hopefully receive—forgiveness. For none of the soul-searching, none of the painful hard work we accept upon ourselves can truly bear fruit without the redemptive and closure-filled act of forgiveness. Especially the forgiveness we give to ourselves.

My all-time favorite prayer is, “God, please help me to be the kind of man my dog thinks I am.” Of course, the underlying premise is that we don't think we are worthy. We think *if only our dogs really knew what we are like* they would judge us as harshly as we do ourselves. Perhaps. Nonetheless, it all gets summed up in one of my favorite lines from the film *As Good As It Gets* as Jack Nicholson confesses his love to Helen Hunt saying, “You make me want to be a better man.”

Is this not our ultimate goal, to be the best possible version of ourselves? Yet—as Rabbi Akiba would have us understand—it is not from our strengths but rather from our weaknesses that we are given the opportunity to become. As Bart Mandel taught me, the greatest gift we can give our child is our *shadow-self*. The act of *teshuvah*, the act of *turning around*, the act of acknowledging and affirming the parts of ourselves that are imperfect and our willingness to engage them is the highest *madregah* or rung on the ladder of human potential. And it is in this context that this day—*Yom HaKippurim*, the Day of Atonements—is understood as the most sacred of days, for on this day we formalize the art of being human.

And so, after hearing the congregation intone *Mi Yitneini*, the Yom Kippur prayer asking that we might realize our potential as human beings, Reb Zusya was overheard to have mumbled to God, “How fortunate You are to have a people so filled with imperfections and failings, for if not who would ever hear such beautiful melodies?”

I only hope that we each have the opportunity to hear that melody ourselves. May we be blessed to teach from the corrected scrolls of our lives.