



Shal N'alecha M'al Raglecha: "Put off Thy Shoes from Thy Feet"

Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, in the midst of his fairly grim autobiography tells one wonderful story. There was a man living near him in one of the displaced persons camps after the Second World War who borrowed ten dollars from him, and assured him that he had a package coming from a relative any day and would positively pay him back the next week.

At week's end, he had an excuse for not paying. And the next week, he had an even better one, and so it went for almost a year. Finally, one day the man approached him with a ten-dollar bill in his hand and said, "My visa has just come through. I'm leaving for Canada tomorrow. Here's the ten dollars I owe you."

But Wiesenthal waved him away: "No, keep it. For ten dollars, it's not worth changing my opinion of you."¹

An amusing anecdote, but perfect for Yom Kippur and the choices we are asked to make. This day entreats us to soften our hearts toughened by hurt and by disappointment: in others, or in ourselves, or in the hand that life has dealt us.

Sometimes the paths we choose for our lives do not lead us where we had envisioned. Once promising careers stagnate; once prosperous businesses flounder; once joyful relationships and marriages fall apart. Illness strikes us or those we love. Family members or friends have not measured up to our expectations of them, nor we of ourselves.

To apologize risks rejection; to forgive, new wounds. To step out into the uncertain waters of recovery, or a new career, or a new relationship, can feel overwhelming. Understandable then, that we would shield our hearts against such vulnerability.

Reconciling with Others

We have been hurt by others.

On Rosh Hashanah we read the tale of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. Recall how at God's command Abraham took Isaac up the mountain and prepared to slaughter him, when an angel cried out, "Stop."

The Torah records no further contact between father and son. On the way up the mountain Isaac, not knowing their journey's purpose, had inquired, "Father...where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"² But Abraham had lied: "God will see to the sheep...my son."³

¹ Rabbi Harold Kushner, "While There is Still Time."

² Gen 22:7, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, W.G. Plaut, Ed., p.146.

³ Gen 22:8, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, W.G. Plaut, Ed., p.146.

Isaac did not return home with his father from the mountaintop. They did not speak. They never again met face to face. Some would say Isaac never forgave Abraham.

How many of us nurture resentment for times we felt sacrificed on the altar of a parent's expectations, a spouse's career? It can be so difficult to forgive those who hurt us. And let's be honest: we may even feel a perverse gratification in acting the victim. Our resentments empower us giving us the edge over those who wronged us. And so we carry them around, not realizing the damage we are doing to ourselves.

There are some abuses, not mythical like Abraham's of Isaac, but real, where forgiveness seems inconceivable.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman who visited him after he'd preached a sermon on forgiveness. She told him how ten years earlier her husband had abandoned her and their children for a younger woman, and how, ever since, she'd been working two jobs and still couldn't afford to buy the kids gifts or take them to the movies. "And you want me to forgive him for what he did to us?" she asked.

"That's right," he answered, "I want you to forgive him – not because he deserves it...but [because of what] you're doing to yourself...For ten years, you've been...holding a hot coal in your hand, waiting for your ex to come by so you could throw it at him, and all you've done is burn your hand. It's in your own best interest to put the coal down and go on with your life."

For our own sakes, we need to put down the hot coals and go on with our lives.

But how does one begin when the hurt runs deep and percolates through the years? It can be so difficult to let it go.

A Midrash returns us to Abraham and Isaac. The Bible tells us that after Sarah's death, Isaac journeyed to *Be-er Lachai Rowee* to find Hagar,⁴ the mother of Abraham's first son Ishmael whom Sarah had chased away, to reunite Hagar with Abraham that his father not be alone. Despite all that Abraham had done to Isaac, the son performs this act of compassion.

Why?

I imagine that Isaac, who never did receive an explanation for what transpired on the mountaintop so many years before, had come to accept that he never would. Finally acknowledging there were certain aspects of his father he never would understand, Isaac was able to give their relationship another chance.

We learn. We learn that for good or for bad, there are certain aspects of the people we love that we may never understand, and most certainly will never change. We also learn that if we can accept this simple yet oh-so-frustrating fact of human nature, then reconciliation is possible, even after years of estrangement.

Remember that haunting verse from the Paul Simon tune, *Slip Slidin' Away*: "I know a father who had a son. He longed to tell him all the reasons for the things he'd done. He came a long way, just to explain. He kissed his boy as he lay sleeping. Then he turned around and headed home again." We may never get the answers we seek. The people we want to love will never be exactly as we want them to be. We cannot expect to change them. Sometimes we simply have to set aside the past and our recollections of the past, and reach out again.

⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* LX:14.

Reconciling with Ourselves

As tough as we may be on others, we save our harshest condemnations for ourselves.

We are like the High Priest Aaron approaching the altar on Yom Kippur to seek forgiveness for himself and for his people. But when he saw the altar's horned shape, he recoiled in guilt, for it called to mind the horns of the golden calf he had made when Moses had disappeared on Mount Sinai.⁵ Moses, descending the mountain with the Ten Commandments in his arms, had sighted the golden calf and smashed the tablets of the covenant in fury. It was as if Aaron had been carrying around their broken fragments ever since.

The past weighs heavily upon us, and not just the injuries we've suffered at the hands of others. Our own mistakes burden us. Beneath their weight, even the slightest steps forward can feel overwhelming.

Yet too often we hold ourselves to unattainable standards of perfection, and then punish ourselves when we fail to meet them. In his book, *How Good Do We Have To Be?* Rabbi Kushner writes: "To say that nobody will ever lead a perfect life any more than any baseball player will ever bat 1.000...to say that human beings do wrong things...and...are capable of cruelty and deceit far worse than any other creature...is a statement about [the nature of] human beings and the complexity of the choices we have to make."⁶

If we could admit that we are not supposed to get it right all the time, we would not need to live the charade of perfection. We would not need to defend against criticism, to blame others when we are at fault. If we understood that being human means being imperfect, making mistakes, then we would admit ours and more easily say, "I'm sorry."

Tonight/today, we acknowledge that we have erred, not that we are inherently or incorrigibly sinful. We can redeem ourselves by doing better.

The rabbis taught that on Yom Kippur, God offered the Israelites a second chance – a second set of tablets. Yom Kippur gives us the chance to start anew. If we choose the path of *teshuva*, a sincere effort to make amends, and allow our mistakes to motivate us to become more compassionate and loving human beings, then Yom Kippur assures us that we can enter the year ahead with a clean slate, in God's eyes as if our transgressions had never been.

According to the Midrash, as Aaron trembled in shame for his terrible sin of the golden calf, Moses placed an arm around his brother. "You should know," he said to him, "God accepts you as you are."⁷ We learn: if God forgives us, we must be willing to forgive ourselves.

Reconciling with Life

Sometimes we choose the wrong fork along life's complicated pathway. And sometimes, through no fault of our own, misfortune chooses us.

There are times when we feel so empty and alone, our reserves drained. And we can almost touch the darkness.

"I have been one acquainted with the night," wrote Robert Frost.

I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

⁵ *Parashat Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim.*

⁶ Rabbi Harold Kushner, *How Good Do We Have To Be?*, p.32.

⁷ *Parashat Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim.*

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain....

How do we lift ourselves up when we have fallen in despair? A rabbinic legend begins to answer. In our tradition's most famous tale of courage, the Israelites stood pinned between the Red Sea's swirling currents and Egypt's ever-approaching army. The tribes argued over who would have the privilege, or misfortune, of marching first into the waters God had not yet parted. According to one version of the story, Nachshon ben Aminadab of the tribe of Judah, bravely took matters into his own hands, and leapt in.⁸ But according to another, he panicked and fell in. Only as the waves enveloped him, did he summon the strength to forge ahead. Only then did the sea divide, revealing a path forward.

Often we do not know our own mettle until we are tested. Only in the midst of our troubles, do we marshal the courage, the resilience we possess.

In his recent history of the Wright brothers, David McCullough recounts their utter dejection in learning that the computations on which they had based their "wing-warping system" were all wrong. "Not in a thousand years would man ever fly," Wilbur lamented at the time. But, as McCullough writes, "the pall of discouragement disappeared...replaced with a surge of characteristic resolve." Said Orville, "We knew that it would take considerable time...to obtain [new] data...but there was some spirit that carried us through..."⁹

My friend Brian tells of his wife Betsy's struggle to recover from leukemia, and their disappointment in learning that even after radiation, chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant, some of Betsy's cancer cells survived: "In many ways a fight against cancer is not so much about the journey as it is about the destination," he writes. "You can take many different paths, and change course along the way, but in the end you have one goal – victory. That goal is still firmly in our sights. It just requires a new plan."

Not long ago I officiated at a wedding – an elegant affair in one of New York's fine hotels. Standing beneath the *chupah*, I watched with tears in my eyes as the two flower girls marched down the aisle. Neither could have been more than ten. One of them suffered from a deeply debilitating muscular disease, and labored with every step. But you would not have known it from the smile on her face. With her young cousin holding her tightly by one hand, she cast rose petals about her with the other.

We too can brace ourselves against the waves and forge ahead. I have witnessed so many of you muster the fortitude to carry on, to labor one step at a time in pain and illness, through uncertainty, in the midst of loss. Somewhere within, you have found a courage, a bravery that not only strengthens you but buoys the spirits of those who need you. We too can take hold of another's hand.

"The vehicles for holiness and redemption are not only ever-present," writes Dr. Norman Cohen, "they constantly beckon us to reach out and take hold of them...waiting for us to open our hearts...to them."¹⁰

⁸ From Daniel Matt in *Learn Torah With...vol3, num16*, and *T. Sotah 36b* in Nechama Leibowitz, "Beshalach 4," *New Studies in Shemot*, p.259.

⁹ David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers*, pp.62-65.

¹⁰ Rabbi Norman J. Cohen, *Self, Struggle and Change*, p.86.

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Yes, it can be a risk to open our hearts – to grant forgiveness, or to seek it; to let others in; to face the future with hope. But Wiesenthal was wrong; it is worth it.

The final service of Yom Kippur, *Neilah*, is known as “the closing of the gates.” Strangely, *Neilah* derives from the same root as *na'al*, “shoe.” When at the burning bush God commands Moses to remove his shoes from his feet and feel the sacred ground beneath him, Moses must decide whether or not to make himself vulnerable to the pain that life can bring – all those sharp stones that pierce and cut – knowing that only if he does can he experience all the fulfillment that life can bring.¹¹

God's command to Moses, *Shal n'alecha m'al raglecha*, “put off thy shoes from thy feet,” was intended for us as well.¹² For we can become so comfortable in our old shoes, our old outlooks, our old estimations of others and of ourselves that we don't want to change. But only if we cut away the protective hardening we have grown about our hearts to shield us from disappointment and hurt, can we hope to reconcile with others, with ourselves, and with our lives.

Tomorrow/This afternoon, as the sun begins to set and the gates of repentance begin to close we will stand as Moses stood, on holy ground. And then we must choose: between entrenchment in old attitudes or openness to new ones, between certainty in our disappointments or a bit of vulnerability but with it the potential for newfound fulfillment and joy. For the sake of our lives, for the sake of our relationships, let us unburden our resentments, forgive others and ourselves, and open our hearts to a new year of new hopes, new possibilities, new dreams.

Amen.

¹¹ On *Itture Torah*, Vol.III, p. 28. in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, W.G. Plaut, Ed., p.407.

¹² Moshe ben Yisrael of Kobryn in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Book Two*, p.170.