

TEN THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT TESHUVA FROM CANOEING

Two men from different walks of life are talking in a Siberian labor camp. One is a Hasidic rabbi and the other is a tightrope walker who was also imprisoned there. Reb Mendel asked the tightrope walker about the secret to his art. “What does one need to master? Balance? Stamina? Concentration?”

The tightrope walker’s answer surprised him. “The secret is always keeping your destination in focus. You have to keep your eyes on the other end of the rope. But do you know what the hardest part is?”

“When you get to the middle?” the rabbi ventured.

“No,” said the tightrope walker. “It’s when you make the turn. Because for a fraction of a second, you lose sight of your destination. When you don’t have sight of your destination that is when you are most likely to fall.”

Our prayers on Rosh Hashanah can make us keenly aware of our destination. Our primary goal is to be written in the Book of Life. Is that really enough? In the amidah, we dare to ask that we be written *b’sefar chayim bracha veshalom ufarnasa tovah*, in the book of life, blessing, peace and a good living too.

But this is the time when we are most vulnerable, when we are making that critical turn. Our task in these 10 days is teshuva, turning and returning to find our way. I cannot imagine ever having the courage or the physique to walk a tightrope. But this past summer, I learned something about the process of teshuva from going canoeing. Brian and I were enjoying a lovely summer getaway to the Berkshires. Of course our time together included a

concert at Tanglewood, a museum and garden tour, good food. But we wanted to try something a little different. Brian discovered an ad for canoe trips on the Housatonic River, just outside Lenox. In our twenty-six years of marriage, we have only gotten into a canoe once before, with our kids, and in the end, everyone ended up in the water. So this was a leap of faith in way. But we were rewarded with some wisdom from our guide, a strong and supportive woman, with her two teenage daughters paddling alongside in kayaks. I sat up front, while Brian paddled in the back and our guide coached us from her own canoe. Whether floating downstream or paddling upstream, we discovered a lot about making mistakes and asking for forgiveness.

1. **Seeing from a different point of view.** When you enter the canoe you gain a totally different perspective on the world. All we could see was grass, sky and water. All we could hear were the paddles splashing in the water and occasional cheeps and chirps and flutters of birds. The peace was only occasionally broken by the instructions we called to each other, or by a thrilled cry when we caught sight of a beaver dam or lily pads. Our guide told us then that you learn a lot about your relationship when you canoe together.

In the mishna of Rosh Hashanah, the rabbis teach that there are four things that avert the evil decree. Three we repeat during these holy days: *teshuva*, *tefila* and *tsedaka*, repentance, prayer and giving of ourselves. And the rabbis add a fourth category, changing one's name and a possible fifth, changing one's location. In other words, if we want to change our habits, to redeem ourselves from destructive

living or even meaningless living, we need a new perspective. We need to become a new person or go to a new place.

The first step to doing teshuva is to look at oneself and one's relationships from a different point of view.

2 What happens here is felt there. No one wants to tip the canoe over. Unless you're a teenager and it's really hot out. But otherwise, the first rule is to keep steady and don't make any sudden moves. When riding with two people, anything I do affects my partner. No matter how safe I feel when I shift from my knees to sitting up, the person behind me feels shaky. The Rabbis, who understood boats and people, taught in a midrash:

A man in a boat began to drill a hole under his seat.

His fellow passengers protested.

"What concern is it of yours?" he responded. "I am making a hole under my seat, not yours."

They replied, "That is so, but when the water comes in - it will sink the whole boat and we will all drown." (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6)

We come together for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur precisely because we know we are all in the same boat.

3 Find a river guide. I first tried canoeing at summer camp, where we practiced on a lake. There were no obstacles to avoid, except the other campers in their canoes. Canoeing on a river is quite different. You have to respond to the twists and turns in the river. The current is

a powerful force, whether it's flowing with you or against you. You can never see your final destination. Everything is hiding behind the bend. For some that could be a daunting proposition, even terrifying, while for others it all adds to the adventure. No matter how experienced we were, neither of us could have navigated the journey without the encouragement and wisdom of our guide.

Stepping into shul on the High Holy days, some may feel swept along by the current while others feel they are paddling upstream, but all of us are together in this ancient and powerful ritual. And all of us need a guide. As we sing with such gusto on Yom Kippur, *ki anu amecha v'ata eloheinu, anu vanecha v'ata avinu.*

We are your people and you are our God.

We are your children and you are our Creator.

We are your community and you are our portion.

We are your vineyard and you are our keeper

We are your faithful and you are our source of faith.

The words on the page, the chanting of the hazzan and the familiar rituals help us to navigate the twists and turns of our river. But to get to our destination, we need to listen for the guidance that comes from the Source of all life, the Voice of Eternity calling us—turn here, turn here!

4 Share and share alike. Each person in the canoe has a unique vantage point. And at the same time, each has to give up a measure of control. Sitting in the bow, I saw clearly what was coming but I had

no idea what Brian was doing behind me. In the back of the canoe, Brian got to steer, but he had to keep adjusting to what I was doing in the front. If I moved my paddle from my left to my right, Brian had to quickly switch sides too. I might start to panic as we headed toward shore and had to let Brian know, sometimes gently but more often urgently, to steer away. We had to work on communicating effectively—with clarity and without reproach.

In the piyut *L'el orech din*, we invoke God as *bochen levavot*, the one who searches our hearts, and *hoge de'ot*, the one who knows our innermost thoughts. Talking to God can be easier than talking to people—we hope that God understands us. But it's also more frightening than talking to people, because we fear that God understands us. The piyut urges us to contemplate our words and focus our thoughts to achieve the best result—for judgment to be overcome by God's compassionate forgiveness.

Teshuva is a process of seeking and giving compassion. It's a time for letting go of control and for communicating as effectively as we can. A sincere apology uses careful words and tone. If I am asking forgiveness, I need to demonstrate my respect for my friend and trust they will respond in kindness. And when I am being asked to grant forgiveness, I need to get outside of my own pain and recognize that my perspective is limited. Both of us have to stop talking and listen.

5 Life is a struggle against the current. Canoeing downstream doesn't take too much effort. We had no idea how easy we had it until

we turned around to go back upriver. Heading upstream, the current will try to carry you in a direction you didn't intend. I would paddle furiously to try to stay out of the strong current and couldn't understand why Brian wasn't helping me. Fortunately we came to realize it wasn't either one's fault. Our power was diminished in contrast to the force of the river.

At the heart of all the prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the *Unetaneh tokef*. Its images are stark and chilling. *Mi yamut umi yichyeh. Mi bekitzo umi lo bekitzo.* Who shall live and who shall die. Who in the fullness of years and who before his proper time. These words frighten us. We refuse to believe that our fate is dependent on good or bad behavior. As I listen to the chanting of *unetaneh tokef*, I see the tracings of all the suffering that surround us. Fires and earthquakes, famine and disease, violence and war. Families break up. Fortunes are lost. Life is hard, the poet tells us. How will we make the most of our precious time and not give up? How can we hold onto each other in the face of life's torrents and rapids, without bringing more strife into our relationships?

When times are good, we can "go with the flow." But when bad things happen, remaining open-hearted can be challenging. Teshuva is an act of faith, of opening ourselves up. It is especially crucial in hard times when we need each other most. It might be tempting to blame others, but that can bring even more damage, since they are struggling against the same stream.

6 Correcting course often means losing momentum. When disaster is looming, here's a bit of advanced canoeing technique. The person in the bow paddles forward while the person in the stern paddles backward. This can be necessary when you have to make a quick turn, but it slows you down a lot. Sitting in front, I could see that if we didn't change direction quickly, we might sail off across to the other side or lurch into the riverbank. Brian took control and brought us to a stop. Afterward we both had to work harder to get up to speed again. But if we hadn't stopped our canoe, the current would have taken us far off course.

These ten days are a time to slow down. The sweet irony of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that we take a lot of time to contemplate how precious and short our lives are. We spend most of our days hurrying along, always moving but never getting there. These awesome days are a time to contemplate our destination and reset our course.

With teshuva, the ultimate goal is to turn, not to keep going in the same direction you've been going. Sometimes it's better to stop and rebuild a relationship than to risk ending it. It may take years to come back, but even though you might take a little longer to arrive back home, what matters is that you are both heading in the right direction.

7 Turn, turn, turn. Even when you're headed downstream, as you paddle along you are never actually heading in the right direction all the time. The tip of the canoe will be pointing at different landmarks at

every moment. The course will be adjusted slightly with every dip of the paddle. That's part of the journey, and usually doesn't take much extra muscle. But it does require vigilance.

This is why the main word for sin, *chet*, as in the *al chet* prayer, means “missing the mark.” How many times have I heard people say, “I didn't mean to”? I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, I didn't mean to leave that task for you to do, I didn't mean to forget you. What we mean to do doesn't always happen. We miss the mark, despite our best intentions. And so the first line of the long confession reads: *Al chet shechatnu lefanecha b'ones uveratzon*—for the sin we have sinned in your presence whether willingly or unintentionally.

Teshuva is also a constant process. While we might spend the next ten days intensely scrutinizing our faults and failings, real relationships demand small and subtle corrections every day. Like saying, I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.

8 Where have I been? While you're canoeing, you lose something if you don't pause and look up. Our guide chides her clients for paying too much attention to the oars and not enough attention to the landscape. I must admit that I did forget to look sometimes, because I was too worried about keeping moving. It was easy to forget why we were there in the first place. This wasn't a race after all.

The special prayers for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, the confessions of sins and the prayers for *chayim tovim*, a good life, are

carefully inserted into the reliable structure of the year-round amidah. Every amidah of every service every day of the year contains the *modim*, the prayer of gratitude. Just before the prayer for peace that ends every amidah, we exclaim: *Modim anachnu lach*. We give thanks to you...today and always...for our lives entrusted to your hand, our souls placed in your care, for your miracles that greet us every day, and for your wonders and the good things that are with us every hour.

Likewise when doing teshuva, there is more to the process than focusing on what we've done wrong or how we can be better. We also need to be grateful for what we have. And enjoy it.

9 What is canoe in Hebrew? I owe this insight to our cantor, Jeff Klepper. The Hebrew word for canoe is—*kanoo*. יבטע
Spelled in Hebrew letters, it has the root *kaf-nun-vav*. Move them around, and you get *kaf-vav-nun*, the root of *kavannah*, intention. Without *kavanah*, the vessel will follow the current any which way. Without *kavanah*, the journey belongs to the river, not to me. Once the boat enters the water, it's my obligation and it's my gift to steer it to my destination.

In the final paragraph of the *unetaneh tokef*, the source of the metaphor of the Book of Life, the rabbis elaborate on an ancient metaphor for human existence: *Adam yesodo me'afar v'sofo le'afar*. "Our origin is dust and our end is dust. As long as we live, we strive

for our bread. We are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that floats, the dream that flies away.

And the final words of the prayer are: *V'atah hu melech el chai v'kayam*. But you, in your grandeur, your closeness, you imbue us with a life that hints at eternity.” [my translation]

In other words, our lives have little meaning in the long run; our existence is fragile and fleeting. But when we fill our being with knowledge of holiness, with intention and awareness, we have access to unlimited power. It is up to us to bring our own kavanah to the journey.

Our amidah prayer always ends with a prayer that asks that the words of our mouths speak what is truly in our hearts. *Yiheyu leratzon imri fi vehegyon libi lefanecha Adonai tsuri vego'ali*. May the words of my prayer and my heart's meditation be seen favorably before You, my Rock and my Redeemer. When performing teshuva, we also need to bring the proper intention, connecting the words of our mouth with the murmurings of our heart. True teshuva, like true prayer, like true living, requires the heart.

10 Yihye tov/It's all good. This is the Torah our guide taught us: It's all good. When we hit the bank and when we avoided the rock, when we succeeded in passing through the narrow opening in the trees and

when we had to brush away the branches, when we shouted warnings or laughed out loud, it all contributed to a wonderful trip.

If we practice teshuva with *kavanah*, with mindfulness, we can live with the mistakes—big and little. Yes, there are imperfections in our relationships, but in the end it's all about the journey.

Birth is a Beginning *by Alvin Fine*

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
And life is a journey
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
 And then perhaps to wisdom;
From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness—
 And, often back again;
From health to sickness
 And back, we pray, to health again;
From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding—
 From fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat—
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies

Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
 A sacred pilgrimage
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
But life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage—
 To life everlasting.

May we all reach our destination safely in the coming year.

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