

We'll Leave the Light on for You
Kol Nidre 5772
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I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first? The good news? The good news is that you are already forgiven. That's what this Bet Din, this Jewish Court, was all about. The five people holding the Torah Scrolls were the witnesses. We heard Kol Nidre three times; three times because it is a legal formulation. And then, in the presence of the Court we demanded of God: "The whole community of Israel and all who live among them have sinned; let them be forgiven." We heard God's response: "I have pardoned as you have asked."

Bottom line? We are already forgiven. And it is not even 7:05 yet.

So what's the bad news? The bad news is that now we have to do the work we committed ourselves to do. We do it from the safe place of knowing we have been forgiven, like a child who grows up in a home where there is unconditional love. But still, we have to do the work; look at our life... decide if we have the courage and the will to change.

This is not so easy. It is powerfully captured in this poem by the contemporary poet and song writer Portia Nelson called "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters." (It is on the bookmark in your announcement booklets—you might want to look at it as I read.)

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Chapter 1

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

This is a poem about what we are doing here together; it is a poem about teshuvah, repentance turning... it is a poem about personal transformation. We've all been there. It is the biography of each of our lives. The holes? A bad habit. Bad relationships. A hurtful impulse. An addiction. An insecurity. Anger. Quick to judgment. A critical voice.

At first we don't even see the holes so we fall in. Maybe it is too dark. We blame someone else. We feel powerless. It is very hard to climb out, to get back on the street. And then... there we are again, falling into the same hole. We knew it was there, but somehow thought it would be different. But here we are again.... the same bad relationship but with a different person? The same kind of conflict with a friend or colleague that you've been in before. The exact same argument with your kids or your partner? It's not your fault. Why does this always happen to me, you ask? Still not taking responsibility.

It is in the third chapter that teshuvah begins: same street; same hole. But this time you recognize the pattern. You take responsibility. You are aware of what you are doing. With that awareness, it is a lot easier to get out.

Chapter four is when teshuvah becomes real. The hole is still there, but you walk around. You don't take that drink. You take a breath instead of yelling. You don't park illegally in the handicapped space. You bite your tongue instead of passing on gossip. You don't forward that anti Muslim email. You don't cut corners in business. You don't cheat on your taxes. You don't have the affair, even though you could. You act out of compassion instead of anger.

Maimonides describes this moment in his classic work on the Laws of Repentance: "Who has achieved full teshuva? The person who is again given the opportunity to sin in the same way and he still has the power to do so but he nonetheless does not on account of his teshuvah and not out of fear or because

he lacks the physical strength. So if for example he once sinned with a woman and after a time found himself alone with her again and he is still in love with her and still has the physical strength... if he leaves without sinning again then he is a full ba'al teshuvah."

Same street, same attraction.... But the ba'al teshuva, the one who has done teshuvah, walks around it.

Chapter 5: it seems to go beyond Maimonides. Don't stop at walking around the hole. Choose a different street. It reminded me of a well known Jewish joke. Mendel has been visiting a prostitute on Sunset Blvd for years. He wants to do teshuvah but every time he walks down Sunset Blvd there she is, tempting him. So he goes to his rabbi for advice. After Mendel explains the situation the rabbi responds: "Next time take Wilshire.

Seriously, how do you understand chapter 5? We walk down a different street. What do we find? Certainly there are still holes, new ones perhaps. Do we go back to chapter one? Falling in, avoiding responsibility? Or are we different enough now that even though there will still be challenges, the awareness that led to teshuvah has shed enough light to see those challenge and walk around those new holes too?

Rabbi Soloveitchik, the most important modern Orthodox thinker of the 20th Century, argues that repentance enables you to recreate and reimagining yourself as if to say: "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned." Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, disagrees. For him, you are who you are in some ways because of the holes you have been in. The secret of teshuvah for him is not that you become a different person but that you learn from your mistakes. That learning becomes, in his words " a stimulant for good and delight, the joy in God and God's light."

The light that comes from teshuvah helps you discover that these holes are opportunities for self-reflection and growth. . My teacher Alan Morinis tells this story about his own transformation: "My film work crashed to an abrupt halt in 1997 when my company hit the skids. What ultimately backfired on me were choices and decisions I myself had made. I hadn't been nearly as honest as I should have been or as I saw myself to be. I thought I was being practical and pragmatic, even effective. But one day what I can only call my crookedness caught up with me and I was brought face-to-face with a painful vision of who I had become at that time." He goes on to explain "Confronting my dark side set off a crisis...though in a strange way, I actually felt energized by my unmasking. I had suddenly been handed a very meaningful curriculum: my mission was to redo my life, from the inside out. "

Falling into this hole led Morinis to explore the field of Mussar, a spiritual practice that began to emerge in the 10th century and became a full-fledged movement in the Jewish world of 19th-century Lithuania. The practice of Mussar begins with

the realization that each one of us is endowed with every human temperament: humility, patience, gratitude, anger, equanimity, generosity, greed, desire and a host of others. The problem emerges when any of these get out of balance. Mussar helps us identify the internal struggle we have with their dark side, their negative dimensions. Back to the poem: the practice of Mussar helps us shed light on our path so we can see the holes, learn from what draws us to them, and then walk around them.

This year I studied Mussar with a group of congregants and found it to be a powerful spiritual practice. One of the students, a professor, reported that a colleague asked her a strange question after an interaction in her department. "You seem so different," the colleague said. "Last year that same interaction would have led you to lose your temper. Now you seem so calm. You really have changed!" She told her colleague that the change had come about through her Mussar practice... noticing the holes, paying attention to when she fell in, and learning to avoid them.

None of us are perfect. That's why we need Yom Kippur, year after year. We need a safe and structured way to look at our lives, enough light to see the street on which we walk, the holes that we keep falling into. We need to believe we can change. And we need to know that we are not alone. That's a dimension that the poem is missing for me; it only focuses on us as individuals. Yes, teshuvah is intensely personal; my struggle to change is my own work. But I commit to it here, in this beautiful but crowded sanctuary, praying with other imperfect people, confessing out loud to sins that I may not have even committed. "Al Chet sh'chatanu ...For the sins we have committed against you by giving and taking bribes"? Not my hole....but I still say it. Because I am part of a community... and confessing out loud, in front of other people, along with other people, helps me feel safe enough to confront those holes, that dark side, that I really do struggle with. And as I take responsibility, I know I have to repair the relationships that have been hurt. Now it is 7:20.

And here I am... already forgiven, and ready to spend the next 24 hours with all of you here in this sanctuary illuminated by light, looking at the streets on which I have walked, the holes into which I have fallen, the work on myself that I still need to do in order to walk down whatever new streets will be part of my journey in the future.

I see a little more clearly now. The light from teshuvah that shines on these streets is right here... in this transformed sanctuary, the divine light that flows through those hands above the ark.

God's hands. Your hands. My hands.

We have come home to Yom Kippur, to each other, to teshuvah.

I conclude with the words of the famous Motel Six commercial: We'll leave the light on for you.

And so we begin our work of transformation, together.