

Temple Emanuel – Rabbi Laura Geller
Yom Kippur – 2006

It happened just at this moment...more than 3000 years ago. Tired from his forty days of fasting and praying, Moses was still struggling to block out of his mind the terrible images of seeing all those people out of control, laughing as they danced faster and faster around this golden idol ... a calf... like they used to worship in Egypt. How could they do it, so soon after they had stood at Mt Sinai in the thunder and lightning of God's presence? Why were they so easily diverted? What made them so confused, so afraid to trust what they had just experienced, so quick to betray what they should have loved? And Moses was still angry at himself as well, because he had lost it then too. He was so furious that he took the stone tablets inscribed by the very finger of God and he smashed them! How could he? They were touched by God's own hand! Did he actually hurl them against the ground? Or did the holy letters fly away so that all that was left were stones so heavy he couldn't hold them any more?

It seemed like a lifetime ago that this happened, but it was only 40 days, the first of Elul. The very next day Moses started to climb back up the mountain, hoping against hope to be able to start again, praying for another chance, wondering whether God could ever forgive this people... and whether God could ever forgive him.

Tormented by his own despair and dread, he pleaded with the God he knew only as the One who always was and always would be: "Let me see your face!" But even as Moses spoke those words, he knew he had asked the impossible: no one can see God's face and live.

Instead, he heard God's voice reverberate within him. "Stand over there, in the cleft of the rock. My glory will pass by you in a cloud; you won't see my face; but you will see my back."

As God's presence passed by, God's essence was revealed: "This is who I am: [sing] Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun... Adonai Adonai, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, radiating truth, extending kindness throughout the generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin."

"This is who I am," God said: "Adonai, still Adonai, the same before a person sins as after: compassionate and gracious; abounding in kindness even as I see what is true, and forgiving human beings when they sin."

Moses carved a second set of stone tablets, this time written with the knowledge of human weakness. The first time they were fashioned by God alone, but this time it was the work of Moses and God together. The first time they were perfect; this time they reflected the reality of human frailty, the disappointment of broken promises and tarnished hopes.

Moses came back down the mountain today, forty days after the first of Elul, the day of Yom Kippur. Our ancestors took these stone tablets, along with the broken shards that remained of the first, and put them in the holy ark to carry with us on our journey. That day was Yom Kippur, the very first Yom Kippur.

Here we are again, another Yom Kippur, some 3000 years later. We are still carrying both sets of those stone tablets with us on our journey. The hope for wholeness and the truth of brokenness exist together... in each of us. None of us is perfect. Each of

us struggle with limitations and weakness; each of us has broken promises and betrayed what we have loved. But in spite of this, forgiveness is built into the deep structure of the universe. God's essence reveals itself, and it is compassion. That is what we are saying when we sing the thirteen attributes of God: [sing] Adonai, Adonai.

Today is the day we admit out loud what we know deep in our hearts: we are all flawed, every one of us. We each have secret shame, demons we wrestle with. We each have danced with that golden calf; we each have been dirtied by the dust kicked up by broken tablets.

Each of us has sinned, though we don't like to use that word. Each of us can remember things we have done that make us ashamed, lies we have told to save face, people we have hurt to make us feel important, promises we have broken for a fleeting pleasure. We try not to remember, and when we do, we often try to excuse our behavior, or we blame other people. It wasn't my fault, I say to myself, even as I know that I could have acted differently.

But today, today, the anniversary of the day God gave us another chance, maybe I can face one of the truths of my life: I have done things that I regret. I have acted out of places of weakness. I carry my brokenness with me on my journey through life.

Admitting this truth is the beginning of teshuvah...

A couple of years ago, a college friend, an engaged and involved Jew, sent a letter to his friends and colleagues... including me:

"I write this letter with a heavy but increasingly open heart. For the past twenty years, I have been struggling with alcoholism. No one outside of my immediate family has known that even as I managed to be a successful professional, I was drifting in and out of alcohol abuse.

I am finally ready to take the High Holy Day lessons of our tradition seriously. We are all flawed—each and every one of us. Yom Kippur offers me an opportunity for a new beginning but only I can acknowledge these flaws. Over the years I've studied Jewish texts about suffering and pain; I always imagined they were talking about other people. But now I know: the other people include me.

This letter is the beginning of my teshuvah and the public commitment to address this challenge in my life once and for all."

It took great courage for my friend to write this letter. Clearly this is not the first time he has wrestled with his demons... teshuvah isn't a smooth linear process. You don't just choose to change; you have to keep choosing, keep risking, keep trying to carve a new set of tablets, less pure perhaps than the first, but holy none the less. Holy because we are turning toward the God of compassion, trusting that forgiveness is real and that no matter what, we are capable of change. That's what it means to sing: Adonai, adonai, El rachum v'chanun...

My friend has taken the first steps of teshuvah... first remorse and confession. The next steps, outlined by our tradition, include reparation and finally commitment not to repeat the sin under similar conditions. He could take the first steps because he trusts that forgiveness is already given... that according to our tradition, teshuvah was created

before the universe came into being... that is, even before humanity was created, humans were given the possibility of changing the course of their lives. I'm sure he knows better than anyone that there have been consequences of his addiction and his hiding from it; he will always carry his brokenness. But he also knows that there are second chances, that change is possible.

The evil urge, according to the rabbis, often comes to us with the message that the past determines the future, that who we have been is who we will always be. But Yom Kippur, the anniversary of the day Moses descended with the second set of tablets, comes with a different message, a message reinforced by our Torah portion: ...”If you return to God and listen to God’s voice... Then God will... have compassion on you. God will circumcise the foreskin of your heart... you will turn and you will hear the voice of God.”

[Sing] Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v’chanun....

We listen to God’s voice. We know that forgiveness is possible. We turn, and God turns too... We can’t do this by ourselves... we need God’s grace to circumcise our hearts... to cut away the protective covering that anesthetizes the pain we feel about what is broken in our lives. Some of us mask the pain of our brokenness by depression, fearfulness, selfishness, or lack of joy; others through addictive behaviors connected to alcohol, drugs, food, overwork, internet pornography, shopping, gambling, illicit sex... These are real addictions, right here in our community... I know and you know... I know because you have shared with me some of the secrets of your life... I know my own secrets...

The Torah we read this morning continues: “I have set before you this day, life and death, blessing and curse...therefore choose life...”

This seems so obvious, doesn’t it? Who wouldn’t choose life when faced with the choice between life and death?

The choice offered here is different. In our lives there is both life and death, blessings and curse. That is what it means to be a human being. As we deal with what has been set before us, how will we choose to respond? When we suffer loss, and we all will, can we still discover blessing? When we struggle through hard times, and we all will, can we make life-affirming choices? When we feel stuck in old patterns that deaden us, and we all will, will we stay stuck, or will we risk choosing life, risk making our hearts vulnerable, risk confronting the behaviors that keep us from feeling whole? Will we choose blame, anger, boredom, fear, the anesthesia of addictive behavior? Or will we choose life and blessing?

“I have set before you this day, life and death, blessing and curse... therefore choose life...”

Whenever Torah uses the expression “this day,” it alludes to the possibility of teshuvah. The key to teshuvah is knowing how to use this day, this moment, this now.

My college friend had fallen into a deep pit. Now he is climbing out. Now he is choosing life. His first step was writing that letter. Most of us haven’t fallen so deep. But maybe there is a letter we need to write... maybe there is a rip we need to mend... maybe there is a secret we need to reveal... maybe there is work we need to do... to choose life... this day, this very moment... this now.

Then, like Moses, each of us will climb down the mountain... holding the new tablets, inscribed in our circumcised hearts. What we hold in our hearts isn’t perfect, but

it reflects the truths we have learned about ourselves. Right now, we are in the cleft of the rock, wanting to see God's face, wanting to know that God is in our lives. We can't see God's face, but if we listen hard, we might hear God's voice... or see God's back as God's presence passes before us...

Seeing God's back means we are looking in the same direction as God... we are seeing the world from God's perspective... through God's eyes... eyes softened by compassion, forgiveness, kindness, eyes unclouded by anger, eyes that see the truth of the present moment... That what it means when we sing: "Adonai, Adonai."

It means: you can choose life. Now.

[Cantor Kliger sings... Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'chanun... as we open the ark for the Torah service.]