

Who would have thought that the tale of Peter Rabbit is actually a Jewish tale?

This is the first tale of Peter Rabbit I ever remember learning and I bet you could tell it, too.

Peter Rabbit saw a hole in a garden gate and hopped through. In the garden he found everything to tempt a little bunny's appetite. There were carrots and radishes and beans and turnips, and he ate to his heart's content. But when he hopped back to the hole in the garden gate, alas, he found that he was now too big to fit through the hole! He was fat and happy, but oh there was no way he was fitting through. (Putting aside his fears of Farmer McGregor finding him), Peter had to wait until his body had shrunk back to its uninflated size, so he could fit through the opening at the entrance to the garden.

That is exactly the predicament we are in this evening, and no, this is not an indictment on how much we may or may not have eaten at *yuntif* dinner tonight. There is a doorway that we are beckoned to come through, as we step into the new year. And while our tradition says that the gates to repentance are wide...the truth is, there are some things that can't fit through that gateway. So like Peter, there are a few indulgences we might have to shed before we can actually come through the gates of repentance. What is overinflated in us, and how do we "right size" ourselves for this season of taking an accounting of our souls?

Now it is possible, quite possible, to see the HHDs as a few hours of services, some good holiday food, the chance to see friends, wear clothes other than sweatpants, listen to favorite HHD tunes and *maybe* hear a good sermon or two. But the truth is, all of this- the liturgy, the music, the sermons, this is the **edifice** we build on Rosh Hashanah, just to get us to step out of our routine, stop our life for a bit, and look inward to our soul, for some serious, sustained, self-examination into our behavior, and our character. When we engage in self-examination, because we are human, we will find there are things we have done, and haven't done, in the last year that we regret, course corrections in some of our relationships. In other words, we have ongoing work to do to live up to the best that is within us. And Judaism is asking nothing less than "the best that is within us". How will we actualize our potential for goodness, kindness, and for impacting others positively? How sublime is this faith, that says, on the holiest of days: come sit down. We don't want you here to indoctrinate some narrative, or because God needs your worship. God wants you to use this time to focus on yourself. Change yourself for the better, that is what the Holy One wants.

The tool for all of this is repentance, teshuvah. Teshuvah is a positive word, not a negative word; it is not about punishment for behavior. The goal is not to slide into temple once a year, think back on the things we did wrong, feel guilty or bad, vow never to do it again, and then be off. Teshuva is a powerful, daily practice of self-growth, to cultivate the ability to

see ourselves with honest eyes, and with that self-awareness, to keep making tiny course corrections, adaptations to the way we act. With awareness we can ask: How did I feel, is that how I wanted to feel? Is that how I see myself? What behavior would lead me to greater self-respect?. That is the sense of mindfulness we are to bring to the way we interact with others. Repenting isn't a once-a-year deal, it is a tool for self-improvement to use over and over. We may talk about teshuvah a lot at this time of year, but repentance and forgiveness are part of the daily prayers. By way of analogy, it's like Peter Rabbit running amok for a year, aware of his overindulgence only once he is stuck, and then crash dieting at the fence, *versus* Peter Rabbit making it a daily practice to hop through the garden gate nibble a bit, and then hopping back out, exercising awareness to how big he is and how big the hole in the gate is.

So what is it in ourselves that needs to be right-sized at this season? The Chasidic teacher, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav teaches that to engage in teshuvah, we need to constrict our egos. We must make ourselves small. A great image for this is at Passover time; we give up inflated bread and eat only matzo, humbled, not full of itself, but containing just the key ingredients of wheat and water. A good dose of humility can help us pass through the gates of repentance, and not get stuck like Peter because of the excess traits we have taken on, that are not serving our souls well.

Now if you are resolving to do teshuvah by becoming humble, indeed the most humble person in the world, you are too late, for Torah tells us in the Book of Numbers 12:3 that God has declared Moses the most humble person on the face of the earth. In short, Moses hears his beloved siblings, Aaron and Miriam, trash-talking about his wife, a Cushite woman. If you were Moses, in this moment, what would your response be? The potential to cause a major family rift is palpable- this is a moment that gossip magazines were created for. And in fact, that is exactly what Aaron and Miriam are doing- gossiping. Moses chooses not to blow up, not to defend his wife, not to excoriate his sister or abrade his brother. He says nothing. But this choosing to be non-reactive is not being a doormat. Would yelling make him feel better in the moment, but let loose words that he might later regret? Would self-righteous anger really lessen the pain he was feeling in this situation? Or did he have enough faith in Miriam and Aaron to know that his non-response would let the hurt of the moment sit right where it should be- in their own hearts, knowing that they had offended someone they held dear.

Moses earns his title as most humble person in this moment, because he does not let his ego as the leader of the Israelites take hold, and worsen a difficult situation. He chooses restraint, recognizing the human frailty of the moment. This choice keeps his relationship with Aaron and Miriam intact for the future.

Humility is a trait that we learn about from Dr. Alan Morinis, father of the modern Mussar movement. Mussar is the process of examining and improving one's character traits. In his book "Everyday Holiness", Morinis writes, that humility is not an extreme quality but that it stands midway between conceit on one hand and self-effacement on the other. Humility is

having “a balanced, moderate, accurate understanding of yourself that you act on in your life.” A healthy humility can only exist when self-esteem exists, too. (Everyday Holiness, p. 50). Our right-sizing ourselves on this eve of Rosh Hashanah is not about beating our breasts and saying, ‘I am but dust and ashes’. You are- but you are also breathing body, enlivened soul. We need appropriate self-esteem for our soul to have the strength to say: where has my pride inflated me? Where does my fear blind my vision? What is my ego standing in the way of me seeing more accurately? Peter Rabbit does not starve himself to death stuck in the hole- he simply remains quietly in that place until he has done the work of right-sizing, so he can move safely ahead. That is our challenge in this moment; not to hide in our inflated egos, and not to eviscerate ourselves, but to simply remain quietly in our place, doing the work of right-sizing who we truly are. Only by doing that work will we be able to free ourselves to pass through the gate into true repentance.

On Yom Kippur, after serious self-reflection, we will recite Vidui prayers- confessing for transgressions we have done, and transgressions that the community has done, for we are ultimately responsible for more than just our individual selves. HaRav Kook, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century chief rabbi in Palestine, taught that there is great repair to the soul when we confess these Vidui prayers, but, there is also great value to the soul when we recite our good deeds, for they strengthen our paths in life-affirming ways. If we in our humility, must confess, we have been arrogant, conceited, fearful, and head-strong, then we should also remember to affirm when we have been accepting, trusting, compromising, loving. We are not looking for self-effacement, to belittle ourselves in a way that snuffs out personal growth. We are looking for, in Dr. Morinis’ words, a balanced, accurate understanding of ourselves and carry that into the year ahead.

Look up in the sky tonight, as you leave shul. The full radiant moon of two weeks ago, has shown us how to subdue our ego; for this night, the first night of the year, is a new moon, a humble sliver. May we bring our humble, heartfelt, honest and penitent heart into the season ahead, as we grow together toward holiness. Amen.