

ROSH HASHANAH – DAY ONE SERMON - FINAL

A Rabbi was sitting in on a conversation between two learned students of Torah. One said to the other, “I have learned the entire Talmud and I am close to memorizing every page. No rabbi or rabbinical court will challenge my decision, and this will bring us all closer to the coming of the Messiah. God has blessed me with a photographic memory and instant recall of all texts that I will cite to support my decisions on Jewish law.”

The other student was duly impressed. He asked the rabbi, “Moshe Yaacov has achieved the ultimate goal of Talmud and Torah study, has he not?”

Rabbi Bunam looked at both lads and smiled. “Yes, it is important to know the texts of our tradition to the best of our ability. But let me also remind you that a fool *says what he knows* while a sage *knows what he says*.”

Giving advice or providing feedback is a tricky art. Rabbi Bunam probably surprised them with his subtle critique that the priority was not on total recall but that of relying on and understanding the texts and what we believe they mean. The honor and merit of Torah learning is not simply about how much we learn but, more importantly, it is the quality and conviction of *what we learn* that matters most.

It is fair to say that Judaism abounds with stories about Rabbis who give advice to their congregants and students. But don’t for a moment think that it is an easy task. Jews are used to thinking about rabbis as the people who listen to us and then tell us the truth. However, does the truth refer to the *entire* truth even if it means telling someone *what we think they need to hear*, compared to what they might *want* to hear from us? That was the underlying lesson of Rabbi Bunam’s advice to the brilliant young students.

A congregant once asked me, “Rabbi, what do you do for most of the day?”

“What do you think I do? “ I asked in turn.

“Well, I suppose you sit in your office and give advice to people. Don’t you give them the benefit of your wisdom?”

I explained to her that I wished it were that easy to provide counsel to people who ask for advice on their issues. It is quite the hardest thing to tell someone who is confronted with a struggle in their lives, what I *need* to tell them rather than what they wish to hear. Trust me when I say that, more often than not in my own life, I too, have been on the receiving end of advice from family, rabbinical mentors or lay leaders when I faced a dilemma in my personal or professional life, and it was also difficult for me to hear what I *needed* to hear, rather than what I wanted to hear from them. So, it is not easy to listen to that kind of advice, and it is not easy to give it to someone we care about, especially when we know they are expecting to hear something else.

Religion is in large part about making decisions in order to do the right thing and most of us *want* to do the right thing in life, and we all face thorny questions where the answer is anything but clear. We look to people we respect, and we go to them and ask for advice. Thankfully, it sometimes confirms our perspective on a problem, but then at others, their counsel certainly does not fit our preconceived notions about what we originally thought we should do, and therein lies the rub. Our stomach muscles begin to tighten, and the old blood pressure starts to rise at hearing that the solution to our problem requires us to re-think not only the problem, but the solution we were counting on as well!

Advice we *need* to hear but do not *want* to hear, usually means we have to face our shortcomings and then have to come to grips with the reality that doing the right thing can be painful to us, especially to our pride and self-esteem. Isn't it true that we often find it hardest to take the advice offered by people who are closest to us? It could come from a spouse or even our children, or from best friends or trusted colleagues who care enough to risk their relationship with us when they share a criticism and offer a solution, and oh, how difficult it is to hear that from them! And why? Because we know they know us best and we cannot hide from them as we do from others.

It is not always true that wisdom comes as a result of learning from mistakes or the tough lessons that require implementation to correct to errors of judgment. Is this then the challenge of *chesbon nefesh*, the mandate during the High Holy Days that requires us not only to listen to ourselves but also to accept hard advice when we face the issues in our lives that are unresolved, and that continue to afflict us? Many of these are questions that have been on our minds for a long time and yet, each year, we somehow manage to skirt the issues because the resolutions force us to face unpleasant truths. Yet, *teshuvah* or repentance means addressing them, which is the only way we can clear our consciences and renew ourselves. Sometimes, listening to what we *need* to hear requires *us* to do the apologizing, and other times, it means *we* have to grant forgiveness to another. Both can be daunting.

Rabbis have taught that God says to us that if you open a pinhole size worth of repentance, He will expand it a thousand-fold. But, finding the strength to listen to the advice in the first place, is necessary in order to begin the critical process of change and spiritual renewal. The next ten days, the Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*, is the period of time when we go beyond the mundane in our lives and get down to the nitty-gritty! It is the time for listening to the hard questions and implementing the even harder resolutions.

My favorite story about taking difficult advice, is one about King David. As you will remember, he fell in love with Bathsheba and he wanted her in the worst way! The problem was that she was married to another, one of his senior officers, Uriah the Hittite. David desire for the woman was great and in order to get Bathsheba for himself, he sent Uriah to the front lines in the Israelite war against the Philistines, knowing full well that sending him there would put the man in mortal danger. Of course, his plan worked and Uriah died in battle, leaving King David to claim Bathsheba for himself after her period of mourning was over. Now in those days, there was only one person who could tell the king what he needed to hear and that person was the prophet to King David, Nathan. At the risk to his life, Nathan told King David this story.

There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had very large flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it and it grew up together with him and his children; it used to share his food and his drink and even nestled in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. One day a traveler came to the home of the rich man, who was loathe to take anything from his own flocks to prepare a meal for his guest; so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the traveler. Hearing this story, King David flew into a passion against the rich man and said that he deserved to die for what he had done. Nathan stared deeply into the King's eyes and then he said, "Thou, art the man. You sent Uriah the Hittite to his death because you coveted his wife, Bathsheba. And further said Nathan, "The Lord who annointed you king over Israel and who rescued you from the hand of Saul is sorely displeased with you for what you have done. The Lord will cause a calamity to rise against you from within your own house. He will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes who shall sleep with your wives under this very sun." David was stunned. His whole body tightened but he could not respond. He bowed his head and after a while, looked up at Nathan, saying, "I stand guilty before the Lord!"

The culmination of the story is that Nathan told him that the Lord would forgive him but that there would be a price to pay. And so there was. Bathsheba had conceived of a son with David but soon after his birth, the child died.

Many years ago, I served as the Assistant Rabbi in a congregation very much like Temple Shalom. The Senior Rabbi had a heart attack and was forced to take a leave of absence and I had to lead the congregation during his convalescence. However, soon after, a man in the congregation murdered his wife and you can imagine how the entire congregation reacted to this shocking event. After the funeral while the husband was out on bail, he asked me to go with him to the cemetery. I still remember it very clearly: I wasn't sure what was going to happen so I was reluctant but all the same, I went. We stood at the grave marker and he began to speak about the future: he talked about how he would lead his new life and make things better for himself and his children and he talked about how he felt he could be a better person.

What I wanted to say to him was, "Man, what are you saying? Don't you think you need to acknowledge your heinous crime and what you did to your wife and the impact it will now have on your children"? I failed him that day because I just didn't know how to say to him what I believed he needed to hear. I listened but I could not respond. I've always regretted the missed opportunity but looking back on it now, I realize that I was simply afraid and not mature enough to say what needed to be said there at the graveside of the man's poor wife. Here I should add that the man was ultimately convicted for the crime of murder in the second degree, and is still serving his sentence in prison.

And I can recall other occasions when I did not live up to the calling of my rabbinate, and caused hurt because of it. Now I am grateful to those who sat me down, and forced me to hear how I'd disappointed another human being. At first, all I wanted to do was dismiss the problem so I could hide from it, but it was inescapable and I *had to* make the amends. I was fortunate to have good guidance and although it was difficult to face the people I needed to and admit to my mistakes, I did.

At Yom Kippur we pray to God:
“For the sin we have committed against thee; for not heeding the advice to admit our mistakes and give our best effort to rectify them.”
“For the sin we have committed against thee; for not giving forgiveness when a heartfelt repentance is offered to us.”
“For the sin we have committed against thee; for hiding from unpleasant truths that afflict us, deluding ourselves into believing they will somehow just disappear in time.”
All these sins require us to hear with our hearts and minds, and respond to vexing questions about ourselves. And finally, consider this transgression:
“For the sin we have committed against thee; for lashing out or ignoring the wisdom of others who earnestly seek our welfare.”

Whether we are on the side of asking forgiveness or granting it, we can be equally obstinate and intransigent in not doing the right thing.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, told the story of a hunter whom the prophet Elijah met in the wilderness and asked why he was living there, without the Torah and without the commandments.

The hunter defended himself by saying: “I never could find the gate that leads to the presence of God.”

“You were certainly not born a hunter,” said Elijah. “So from whom did you learn to follow this calling?”

“My need taught me,” replied the hunter.

“And that was your *only* need?”

Advice the hunter may not have wanted to hear but what he needed to hear.

Can we be so confident in our judgment and so arrogant in our self-esteem that we will not listen to counsel?

Is the best counsel that which confirms what we want to hear as opposed to counsel that moves us to where we need to be in working the problem? Is that not what God wants us to do at this time of the year? Work the problem?

We have been given the strength to listen, the ability to discern and the temperament to receive counsel that is painful, all of which enables us to achieve *tikkun ha-olam*, the repair of the inner world that is not yet healed.

ENDS.