

Rosh Hashanah 5773
Unifying Our Souls

A Hasidic student of the Seer of Lublin once undertook to fast from one Shabbat to the next. On the Friday afternoon before the fast was to end, he was overcome with such a terrible thirst that he thought he would die. He caught sight of a well and went to drink from it.

But then, he realized that his inability to hold out for just one more hour would undo the effort of the whole past week. He turned away from the well and did not drink. Soon though, pride stirred in him for his ability to resist the temptation. Becoming aware of the pride, he said to himself: "Better I should drink, than have my heart filled with arrogance." He returned to the well, but as he bent down to dip his cup, he noticed that the thirst was gone!

When Shabbat finally began, he entered his teacher's house. Crossing the threshold, he heard his teacher call out: "No more tinkering!"

When I first read this story a few months ago, I was taken aback. Why, I wondered, should the Seer of Lublin have maligned his student? Here was a man, making an effort to undertake a herculean ritual act, and his ritual teacher belittles him? Doesn't the student's effort to achieve a goal count for something?

As I learned more about this tale, retold by Martin Buber in his little volume, "The Way of Man: According to Hasidic Teaching," I began to think about what we, facing the Days of Awe, might actually be able to learn from this story.

Why did the student take on the burden of such an onerous fast? The Hasid of our story surely didn't begin his difficult undertaking to please the Seer of Lublin, who was known to be opposed to such acts of asceticism. Instead, it seems, the student had hopes of becoming spiritually whole through fasting. This must have also been clear to the teacher, who had obviously closely watched his student's actions over the course of the week.

And yet, The Seer of Lublin accused his student of tinkering. What is the lesson he's trying to teach? The original meaning of a "tinkerer" is an old-time tinsmith who mends leaky pots and pans with sheets of metal. The Seer of Lublin, Buber teaches, wants more for his student. He wants him to be more like a foundry master, who pours molten metal into a mold, making a solid casting without joints or seams.

The teacher in our story does not want his student to settle for tinkering; he wants him to strive to recast himself, so that he can be spiritually whole. Rather than attempting to cover over the broken places in his life, the teacher urges his student to go deeper, to actually strive to fundamentally mend that brokenness. But what does it look like to be

spiritually whole, and how do we get there? And can we really hope to re-cast ourselves? Can we ever hope to do more than tinker?

In our story, it's not the fasting that's the problem, nor is it the temptation. Nor is the Seer of Lublin upset that his student was willing to give up his task to avoid excessive pride. It is the repeated advance and retreat, the to-and-fro, the zigzagging-- that is the questionable behavior that the teacher admonishes.

The problem isn't that, if we're honest with ourselves, we realize that we may have quite a list of amends to make.

The problem comes, as someone on our annual congregational spiritual walk put it last week, when we have the same sins on our list year after year, when we fail to drill down deeply into our actions, when we don't ever seem to do the core work it takes to really make a change in our lives. When, in short, all we do is tinker around the edges of our actions, and then come to these high holidays praying for wholeness, we cannot expect to emerge from Yom Kippur truly renewed and at peace.

Our souls are complicated, self-contradictory, and inconsistent, and they seem to govern everything that we do. Our actions are hesitant and disordered. We have false starts in our efforts to do the right thing. We take two steps forward and one step back, or sometimes the reverse. And we don't often really take full ownership of what we do wrong. Instead, we blame others- our parents, our kids, our circumstances; we blame the limited number of hours in the day.

Some times, for example, when I meet with premarital couples, one partner or the other will say something about their family of origin, in an attempt to explain, for example, why they have such a temper. They say something like, "You know what? I come from a family of yellors. That's how we communicate. And that's why I'm a yellor."

When they're finished yelling this at me, and at their intended spouse, I will often reflect back with them on the fact that, while they do bring this family inheritance with them, they are now adults in their own right. They could decide NOT to be a yellor. They could decide to be different. Often, I find, surprisingly, that they've never thought of this. And this is but one example of what it looks like when we think our souls can't be whole; when we think that our words and our actions and our aspirations can never meet.

I hear often from adult children that they regret not spending more time with their parents, which, they assure themselves, they would do if they had more time. And I hear regularly from parents that they wish their children weren't so over programmed and stressed out. I meet people who feel stuck in the careers they've picked, and others whose work takes them away from their families in ways they regret.

I encounter many people who lament not making time to work out, and others who would give tzedakah if they had a little more money. There are those who express a

desire to be more patient with their loved ones, and others of us who would develop a spiritual practice if they only knew how. We resign ourselves, all too often, to a sense that we don't have a choice as to how to live, how to be, how to carry ourselves in the world. We resign ourselves that "it is what it is," or, more accurately, that "we are who we are," and that resignation in our souls can result in dysfunction in our lives.

But that's why we're here, right? That's why we're reciting all these prayers? That's why we're listening to the call of the shofar. That's why we'll fast on Yom Kippur. We need a quick fix; we need a solution, we need a sheet of metal to guard our souls from any more brokenness, or to hide the brokenness from sight.

Faced with a sense of inertia, faced with temptations that divert us from our goal to be whole, what can we of the complicated souls do to overcome those temptations? Can we do anything other than pause once in awhile, once a year, and pull ourselves together?

Thinking about our story again as we consider these questions, we can hear, perhaps, the teaching that is hidden inside the Seer's short but pointed criticism—namely, that we have the power, the innate ability, to make change in our lives. Judaism makes the audacious assertion that our souls have an inner core, a divine force in their depths, which has the power to bind together the forces that pull us this way and that, to fuse the elements that seem to magnetically toy with our moral compasses.

We can fix what's broken; we can make better choices; we can change our lives- but not necessarily between now and next Shabbat.

We can do more than apologize for yelling. We can stop yelling. We can do more than regret not spending time on our loved ones or ourselves; we can do more than lament what's broken in our relationships and in our souls. We are not necessarily doomed to tinker.

Of course, the other thing we have to give ourselves permission to understand, is that the effort to live with souls made whole is never complete. We must be as ready to forgive ourselves as we are to forgive others. But when we actually turn; when we catch ourselves being inordinately patient, when we decide to say "no" to one more activity for our children despite what the neighbors kids are doing, when we give a little more tzedakah this year, or when we make time to read a book on Jewish meditation, every such task makes us more like a foundry master to our souls, even if there are impurities in the process...

How do we move towards wholeness? From our liturgy, we are reminded of the lesson that the Seer of Lublin sought, however harshly, to teach his student- that fasting alone is insufficient. A day of self-denial won't suffice to make our souls whole. We can't only show up on Yom Kippur hoping to do all the work of a year's worth of struggle and inconsistency. Even diligent fasting alone will not really bring us to completeness. We

must do our best to deal daily with the issues of a contrite heart, of correction, and amendment.

There is something to be said for more regular examinations of our conscience as spiritual check-ups for our daily ride on the road of betterment. But this season of the year serves as an opportunity for us to shock our souls into action. Dr. Ron Wolfson calls it “the percussion of our souls.” Percussion is an interesting term. It means, simply, “to tap” or “to beat.” From time to time on this bima, Cantor Perper percusses a drum to make music. Doctors percuss the lungs and abdomen during physical examinations to assess the condition of underlying organs.

As Jews, in this season, we percuss our hearts. We do this customarily when we recite the dramatic confessions of Ashamnu. We make a fist and beat our chests in rhythm with the words of the prayer. What are we doing? Are we beating ourselves up over the ways we have screwed up our lives and the lives of others in the past year? Are we tapping our bodies to assess the condition of our underlying souls? Are we knocking loose our bad habits, so that that the prayers of the High Holidays can renew us and offer our souls a new chance to be unified?

For me, this season is about all of that and more.

This time is all about seeking wholeness by asking forgiveness. Most obviously, with all the hours we’ll spend here, we’re asking forgiveness of God. We recognize, though, that before approaching God with our requests, we must ask forgiveness from those we’ve wronged, and also grant forgiveness to those who genuinely seek it from us. And we must be willing to do the work of making real, foundational change in our lives.

We have to recognize our mistakes, our shortcomings. We beat our chests as an ironic reminder-- that we must stop beating ourselves up over the ways we’ve missed the mark. We must ultimately forgive ourselves before we can ever hope to forgive others, before we can be at one with ourselves, before we can act more consistently, with integrity, aspiring always to live a life of meaning and purpose.

Percussing the heart, like fasting, is another innovation of the Rabbis to awaken us from our spiritual slumber. Just as the fast is a call to self-contrition, and the piercing sounds of the shofar are a call to action, the beating of the chest emphasizes the importance, the seriousness, of our souls’ desire- not just to be fixed, but to be whole.

It is told that Rabbi Nahum, a son of the Rizhner rabbi, once visited the house of study unannounced on one of the days of Chanukah. He found his students playing checkers, as was the custom in those days. When they saw the tzaddik appear in the room, they became bewildered and speechless. The teacher, however, gave a friendly nod and asked, “Do you know the rules of checkers?”

The students were intimidated and remained silent. So he gave the answer himself: “I will tell you the rules of checkers. The first is that you may not take two steps at one time.

The second is that you may only move forward and never turn to move back.

And the third is that when you reach the top, you may proceed to wherever you wish.”

The soul-work we must do in the coming days is hard work. There are no shortcuts, no quick-fixes, no one-size fits all act of soul repair.

The work of unifying our souls is like checkers—one move at a time. So, too, like checkers, if we are to be successful in repairing our souls, we must move forward, never back, forgiving ourselves and others as completely as we can, that we might move on. If we follow these rules—one step at a time, always forward, never back—then we will reach the top. We will be able to be proud of our integrated selves, confident in our ability to change our destiny, proud of the decisions we make, as we enter the world once again, renewed.

On Sukkot, we’ll read Ecclesiastes, which teaches, “Everything your hand finds to do, do it with all your strength.” This was interpreted by the Ba’al Shem Tov to mean that every deed we do should engage every limb of our bodies.

This year, let us be honest with ourselves, that we might NOT next year have the same items on our list of regrets. Let us take ownership of our decision making, past, present, and future. This year, let us be open to making a long overdue change in our lives. This year, may we not only remember what is most important, but actually put our priorities in that order.

This year, let our Yom Kippur fast be an affirmation of the recasting of our souls, rather than a replacement for it. This year, no more tinkering.

Shana tova.