

SOS - Saving Our Selves

Rosh Hashana 5781

Until recently I had felt that I was in charge of my life. But I was wrong. I may have rationally acknowledged how much life was a lottery beyond our control, but within my heart I had felt powerful. In reality we are so vulnerable, with so little power and control over our lives. We can so quickly be thrown into a world of chaos and confusion. In many ways it's a devastating realisation. What is the point of all our efforts if they can all be swept away in an instant. This realisation led me to feelings of bitterness and despondency.

That was, until a wise teacher of mine - Rabbi Ami Silver reminded me of the Talmudic story of Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya.

Elazar Ben Durdaya was a seasoned sinner. Until one day the prostitute he was visiting passed wind. She looked him in the eyes and said - just as that wind will never return so too you can never return.

What she said devastated him. Was it really the case that he could not change? He became terrified that forgiveness was beyond him and that he was condemned.

So what did he do? He did what we'd all like to do when we're feeling overwhelmed.

He ran out to nature.

He sat there in the mountains and cried "הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים" Oh Mountains and hills, pray for mercy on my behalf, so that my repentance will be accepted.

They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf.

So he said: "שמים וארץ Heaven and earth, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf.

So he said: "חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים" Oh sun and moon, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf.

So he said: "כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים" Stars and constellations, pray for mercy on my behalf.

They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf.

So he says to himself

אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי

This all depends on nobody but myself. And he kneels over, puts his head between his knees and weeps until he dies.

He is overcome at the realisation that it's not up to nature but it's up to him. He can't rely on the sun, the mountains or the stars to save him - he has to save himself. And that power and responsibility is overwhelming and terrifying for him. He falls to his knees - bends over, cries, screams and wails until his soul departs from his body.

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And then a Bat Kol - a heavenly voice - announces that Rabbi (now he's not just a returned sinner but also a rabbi!) - Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya has been accepted into the world to come - his repentance has been accepted.

I had been feeling that everything was beyond my control but R' Elazar Ben Durdaya reminded me that the most foundational parts of my life - my internal life - is not only within my control but it's the only thing entirely within my control. I cannot rely on anybody else to fix this. The way I respond to my circumstances is entirely up to me.

But more than that, my spheres of control are not just limited to my internal world. There is much that is within my grasp. As an individual there are choices and actions we can take to change our lives and the lives of others.

And as a collective, human beings can make enormous changes to our world. When we work together we can end illness and disease, we can solve poverty and violence and we can end loneliness and despondency. The enormously empowering chiddush of Judaism is that we are partners with the Divine. We do not depend on the constellations, on *shamayaim ve'aretz* - we must depend on ourselves. It's true that there is much beyond our reach. But there is so much that we can grasp - especially when we work together.

As R'Tarfon teaches , *לֹא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה*,
It's not on you to finish the work - but neither are you permitted to rest from it.

It's true that there is much beyond our control. We are knocked side-ways by changes and events. But it's also not true that there is nothing within our control. In fact, the common project of humanity - of repairing the world - is our work and we have not yet finished our task. So we had better get to work.

We have a special tefillah that we turn to over the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* - the 10 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The 13 Attributes of Hashem, *Yud Gimmel Middot* - it goes: "*Vayikra Adonai Adonai El Rachum ve'Chanun Erech Apaim ve'Rav Chesed ve'Emet*". This tefillah was given to us following the sin of the *Egel Hazahav* - the golden calf. After the people sinned Hashem teaches Moshe this prayer as a way for us to reach out to Hashem when we are lost.

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The wise Hasidic masters of Piaseczno and Berdichev have a beautiful insight about this tefillah. The Piaseczno Rebbe teaches:

Before we start to pray - we must reveal within ourselves the aspect of the Shechina - the divine presence - that has descended with us into exile.

She is still present amongst us - only she is hidden.

But we can uncover this aspect of the divine with our prayers as it says in Tehillim - "from the depths I cried out to Hashem."

*In a similar vein, I am calling for God to rise up from **my own depths** -- [as if to say] **'from my very depths I am calling you God, to emerge.'***

And it is through the Godliness that a person uncovers from within themselves that they pray to God.

As it is taught by the Kedushat Levi of Berditchov on the verse, "and God called, 'Hashem! Hashem!'" -- that Hashem is calling to Hashem.

In this passage he is referencing the 13 Attributes of Hashem. This interpretation suggests not that we repeat God's name like we are calling out trying to find Hashem in the dark, but rather, that God is calling out to Godself as if to say, "Where am I?"

This prayer that we have on repeat these next 10 days is God modeling for us how to call out to yourself.

Hashem crying out to themself. And Hashem is doing this in front of Moshe to teach us - that when we are so lost that we cannot see the way to return - like how we felt after the Golden Calf - that what we must do is **cry out to ourselves - to the Divine within us**. It all depends on us, the path forward is within our control.

If it weren't taught by these Hasidic masters 200 years ago you might have thought this heretical but here it is: God is crying out to God's self and we must cry out to ourselves. Hashem is demonstrating the vulnerability of authenticity that comes from really searching within yourself. We must search our depths and find our own selves - for this is the path of redemption. Ourselves and each other. We are our salvation. The Divine within us is how we will be saved.

Author Brene Brown teaches:

What most of us fail to understand is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. We want deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper or more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

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It is true that we are vulnerable. But we must embrace it. We need to be honest with ourselves and with each other. It is from that place of vulnerability that we can find connection, depth and opportunity. From embracing our vulnerability we can save ourselves.

Reinhold Niebuhr, put this message best in his poem-prayer:

Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other

Avinu Malkeinu: help us accept the changes that we cannot control and be brave enough to save ourselves where we can and wise enough to know the difference.

Amen. Shana Tova.