

Making Teshuvah with Ourselves

Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould

Kol Nidre, 2021

This year, I, like most of you, did a fair bit of TV binge watching. Amongst other things, *perhaps* more than once, I watched all of the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies. I love the Marvel Universe. I love the superheroes and their foibles. I love their wild powers and their audacious courage. And one character whose cinematic arc I *especially* love, is Dr. Bruce Banner: The Hulk.

Dr. Banner is a scientist who works with gamma radiation. Through a twisted series of events, he becomes a victim of his own experiments, and is overridden with copious radiation. The radiation transforms Dr. Banner, at least sometimes, into a huge, angry, green monster, called The Hulk.

Throughout much of the story arc, Bruce is at war with, the Hulk, which is to say, himself. He hates the Hulk. He derides the Hulk. He suppresses the Hulk. There is a part of Bruce's own person that he treats with antipathy, that he strangles, and that he viciously critiques. And yet, somehow, all that self-critique and self-deprecation never seems to solve anything.

Then, in one of the later movies, Endgame, we see something shocking. Hulk and Dr. Banner have become integrated. The brawn of one and the brain of the other coexist in a green monster with glasses and a sweater vest, who is a brainiac at science, and, still able to extract physical justice. Banner reflects, "For years, I've been treating the Hulk like he's some kind of disease, something to get rid of. But then I started looking at him as the cure."

To live a fully realized life, Banner had to stop treating himself so terribly. He had to find compassion for his own strengths *and* weaknesses. He had to do Teshuvah with the person he saw in the mirror. And the truth is, as we reflect on the year that was, so do we.

Tonight is Kol Nidre. Tonight is the beginning of Yom Kippur. Tonight is our opportunity to reflect on who we were, and what we've done, and who we could be, and to bridge that gap.

Tonight, we name our faults. Tonight, we say I'm sorry. Tonight, we make a plan of action for how we'll do better the next time. Tonight, we seek forgiveness.

Classically we think of our transgressions in two categories. There are sins *Bein Adam L'Chavero*, between one person and another, and there are sins *Bein Adam L'Makom*, between a person and the Divine. If I said hurtful words to someone, the Teshuvah I need to do is with the person I spoke harshly to. If I neglected Shabbat or Kashrut or Prayer, the Teshuvah I need to do is with God. This *is* the majority of the work which we all need to do.

But, today, I want us to consider a third category of transgression: what are the sins *Bein Adam L'atzmo*, between a person and *themselves*?

If we look at the Al Cheyt confessional in our liturgy, many of the statements that we traditionally interpret to reflect on our treatment of others, could *just* as easily be read as a reflection for how we treat ourselves. We too, are made in the image of God, and when we harm ourselves, we are injuring one whom God intended to treat with love.

ועל חטא שקטאנו לפגיד בטימא שפתיים:

We have sinned against You through foul speech... we have sinned by deriding ourselves, and critiquing ourselves, and speaking of ourselves with disdain.

ועל חטא שקטאנו לפגיד במאכל ובמשקה:

We have sinned against You in our eating and drinking... we have sinned by depriving our bodies, or mistreating our bodies, or putting our bodies in peril.

על חטא שקטאנו לפגיד בשבועת שוא:

We have sinned against You through empty promises... we have sinned by breaking oaths with ourselves, by letting ourselves down, by prioritizing everyone else but neglecting our *own* needs.

For many of us, we spend much of our time focused on others that we may lose sight of the Teshuvah that we must do with ourselves. We have lived our year, as if we were tithing our proverbial field for everyone else's benefit, while *we* silently starved. The truth is that the Torah

has something to say about that. Literally: The Torah describes tithes, 1/10 of a person's agricultural production, which must be dedicated to those in need. In some years we tithe for the benefit of the poor, Ma'aser Ani. In other years we tithe for the benefit of the Levites, Ma'aser Rishon. These make sense- we deduct from our own crop to benefit those who don't have land with which to feed themselves and their families.

But then there's this strange tithe, Ma'aser Sheni:

In Devarim, chapter 14, verse 22 the Torah says:

עֲשֹׂר תַעֲשֹׂר אֶת כָּל־תְּבוּאָת וְרֵעֶךָ הַיֵּצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה שְׁנֵה שְׁנֵה

“You shall surely tithe all the produce of your seed, that which is brought forth from the field year by year.

And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place which God shall choose to cause God's name to dwell there...

And you shall spend the money for whatever your soul desires, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever your soul asks of you; and you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice.”

In other words, Take your money, buy some shawarma and a beer in Yerushalayim, sit down, and eat it.

What kind of a requirement is that? The poor don't benefit. The Levites don't benefit. You aren't required to visit the Temple, or offer a sacrifice, or say a prayer... so God doesn't benefit. What is going on here?

Perhaps the Torah is telling us to put ourselves on the guest list. It is a mitzvah to take care of *you*. To take that time, away from family and away from work, to sit quietly and have a good meal in a sacred place, is a mitzvah. To replenish our own batteries is a mitzvah.

What would we say to someone who treated someone else like garbage? Who never prioritized their loved one? Who treated their loved one with harsh words and endless judgement? Who neglected or starved their loved one's body?

The things we do to ourselves, we would never allow to be done to others. And yet... and yet... and yet, you are a child of God as much as the person next to you is.

What harm have we done to ourselves this year?

Perhaps we have harmed our own bodies. We have not taken care of ourselves. We have stuffed ourselves with alcohol or empty calories, as a means to make up for the feelings we didn't want to confront. We have ignored our own physical needs: healthy food, exercise, sleep. *Chatanu.*

Perhaps we have harmed our own hearts. We have eschewed emotional support. We have held ourselves to unreasonable standards- one we would hold no one else to. We have invested in everyone else, and hung ourselves out to dry. *Chatanu.*

Perhaps we have harmed our own spirits. We have bottled up all our feelings so that we will inevitably implode or explode. We have bottled up our own tears: the screams we didn't scream, the pain we never talked about. *Chatanu.*

So, if there's Teshuvah to be done, how do we go about it? How do you make Teshuvah with yourself? We look to the same framework we would use for anyone else.

Here, we always turn to Rambam, to Maimonides, who provides a road map to Teshuvah for the ages. In the Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, Rambam explains that true Teshuvah necessitates any number of components:

First, Teshuvah begins with a confessional:

מִצּוֹת שְׁבוּתָה ... אִם עָבַר אָדָם עַל אַחַת מֵהֶן ... כְּשִׁיעָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה וְיָשׁוּב מִחֲטָאוֹ תֵּיב לְהַתְּנִידוֹת לִפְנֵי הָאֵל

If a person transgresses any of the mitzvot of the Torah, when they repent, and return from their sin, they must confess before God.

Step one of making Teshuvah with ourselves: confess the sins. Talk to yourself in the mirror. Think it over in your head. Write it down in a journal. Be honest: what is the harm that *you* have done to *you*.

Second, Teshuvah requires a sincere apology:

צָרִיד לְפָנָיו וְלִפְגַּע בּוֹ עַד שְׂמֵחַח לּוֹ

A person must appease the one they harmed and approach them until forgiveness is granted.

Step two of making Teshuvah with ourselves: Say sorry, and mean it. We all know a sincere apology when we hear one. No excuses. Full accountability. It means looking in the mirror and saying, “D’ror, I am so sorry I was so unkind to you, you deserved more, I should have done better by you.”

Third, Teshuvah is more than an apology... it requires an action plan. Real Teshuvah, according to Rambam, is when we prove that we’re really ready to change:

אִי זֶה הֵיא תְּשׁוּבָה גְּמוּרָה. זֶה שֶׁבָּא לְיָדוֹ דְּבַר שֶׁעָבַר בּוֹ וְאֶפְשָׁר בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וּפְרַשׁ וְלֹא עָשָׂה

[Who has reached complete Teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which they sinned, and when they have the potential to commit [the sin again], nevertheless they abstained.

If last year, when I made an error at work, I beat myself up about it for sleepless weeks on end, what will I do when the situation inevitably repeats itself? If last year, when I felt angry, I stuffed down my feelings with wine and potato chips, what’s my plan to make sure next time I take a different path?

Step three of making Teshuvah to ourselves is having a plan to prevent recurrence. Perhaps we need an accountability partner, someone to talk to, to make sure we do better next time? Perhaps we need to proactively allocate some self-care time so that it doesn't just disappear when the calendar is too crowded? What's the plan for doing *better*?

But here's the fun trick about making Teshuvah with yourself. Not only are you the one who needs to apologize, you are also the one who needs to forgive.

How do we forgive ourselves? This year, especially, we need to cut ourselves a break. We need to forgive ourselves for being in survival mode. We need to allow ourselves the lack of productivity at work, or the tempers lost at home, or the friends we didn't connect with when we wanted to. It was a rotten year. No one was their best self. We forgave others. We said to them, "You did the best you could." It's time to say the same to ourselves.

If someone stood before you, with an honest confession, a sincere apology, and a compelling case for change, 99% of the time, you would try your best to forgive them.

We owe ourselves the same courtesy.

We need to forgive ourselves with the same grace we would grant another: "I know you didn't mean to hurt me like that. I believe that you're sorry. You did your best. It's ok. I forgive you. I love you no matter what."

We often reflect on the famous story where Rabbi Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah while standing on one foot. He said, *V'ahavata Le'reacha Kamocha*: Love your neighbor as yourself.

But here's the thing, if you don't love yourself, the phrase doesn't work. If you say to yourself, "you're not good enough", "your misery is your own fault," or "you will never amount to anything", then treating your neighbor as such is *certainly* not the essence of the Torah.

Rather, the injunction works only when it is reciprocal. For some of us, we need to read the Torah in reverse saying, *V'ahavta L'cha Ka're-echa*: Love yourself as much as you love your neighbor.

The season for Teshuvah is upon us. Tonight is Kol Nidre. Yom Kippur has arrived. It is time.

May this Yom Kippur be the beginnings of a teshuvah process *bein adam' lchavero*, between one person and the next, *bein adam l'makom*, between each of us and God, and *bein adam l'atzmo*, between each of us and ourselves.

May we use this opportunity for reflection to dig deep, say sorry, and grant forgiveness... even, and especially, to the person we see when we look in the mirror.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.