

Rightness or Righteousness?

August 17, 2012

Rabbi Suzy Stone

So while the other esteemed clergy are away tonight, I have been asked to give a short sermon—or sermonette. So I thought that I would try to talk about something light and airy.

So I am curious...by a show of hands...how many of you are “sinners”? I have asked you this question because this is the same exact question that was asked of me a couple of years ago in the first line of a sermon given by one of my Christian colleagues while I was attending an interfaith seminar in Malibu. But the only difference was that when he asked this question—every single hand shot up without a moment’s notice—that is every single hand except for the 8 or 10 Jews in the room! My first thought was-- who are these people around me and what have I gotten myself into? My second thought was—what do they mean by sin?

Needless to say, growing up Jewish I often felt uncomfortable with the word “sin.” It seemed like a borrowed term, foreign, serious and very grave. For me, I always imagined a committing a sin meant something like committing murder or adultery. So in my confusion, I headed over to my Christian colleague—a young blond haired guy that could have been mistaken for a surfer dude, and I asked him: “What do you mean by sin” and how is it possible that you are so comfortable raising your hand and saying, “I am a sinner.”

And he replied: “Well...we sin all the time. We lose our patience, we lust after things that are not ours, we swear and we get road rage—these are all forms of sin if we can accept the raw truth of it.”

For better or for worse—in the Jewish community we don’t use the word “sin” in such an easygoing manner. It is for better—because I would argue that we have enough Jewish guilt—we don’t need to be slinging the word sin around to make ourselves feel even guiltier.

On the other hand—it is for worse—because when it comes to the high holidays most of us are completely unprepared to talk about these things. We often fumble for the right words when we want to express our forgiveness with our loved ones and we struggle to find meaning in the machzor (prayer book)—when every other word is a confession of our “sins.”

However, our tradition has a very profound message about sin. In Hebrew, the most common word for a sin is “chet.” As many of you know it means ‘missing the mark.’ It comes from the idea of an archer missing his or her target. The truth is that we all miss the mark—more often than not. Sometimes it is small—like making a flippant remark or forgetting return someone’s phone call. Other times it is

grave— like jealousy, rivalry, or living with friction or brokenness in one’s home or life.

But the sin is not that one sins; because we all sin. Rather, the real sin is not owning up to our mistakes—not just for ourselves or to God—but it is about finding the REAL courage that it takes to say “chatati” (I missed the mark, I sinned) to those we love the most.

Recently I read a story in a magazine about a woman who had a falling out with her best friend. When asked why she had the falling out – she simply said in exasperation: “I don’t know. I did EVERYTHING for her. I would pick her kids up at school, bring her food when she was sick, listen to her for hours on the phone when she was upset! I did nothing wrong and she just stopped talking to me.”

And when the friend was interviewed by the same reporter, the reporter asked—so why is it that you stopped talking to you best friend? “Because she did EVERYTHING for me. She never asked me what I needed or wanted, she just did it....She made me feel incompetent when all I needed was a friend.”

The tricky thing about life is that even when we think you we are doing something right—we may be missing the mark. That is why our tradition gives us more than 10 days (the ya’mim noraim) to seriously reflect on our behavior. Rather it gives us the entire month of ELUL to get comfortable—with the notion (whether we want to call it a sin or a *chet*) that we all have a lot of self-work ahead of us in the coming weeks and months.

I bring this story tonight because this Shabbat marks the first weekend of Rosh Chodesh Elul—the month of reflection and introspection before the High Holidays.

So if you are looking for some good resources during this month I want to suggest at least three things. First, there is an online publication called “Jewels of Elul” which will send you a daily reflection during each day of the upcoming month (www.letmypeoplesing.com). Second, there is a wonderful book by the name of, “This is is Real and You are Totally Unprepared,” by Rabbi Alan Lew (z”l). If you decide to read this book, I am happy to engage in a virtual book club with you and I hope that you will send me an email or a Facebook message with your thoughts and musings. And last but not least, I hope you will join us for our special Selichot service here at CBB on September 8th at 9pm. It is sure to be a meaningful evening.

And with that, I want to leave you with one last piece of wisdom from the great Israeli poet- Yehudah Amichai about our need to recognize our mistakes in order to truly irrigate our souls year after year.

The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right □
Flowers will never grow □ in the spring.

The place where we are right □ is hard
Trampled like a yard.

But doubts and loves □
Dig up the world,
□ Like a mole, a plow. □

And a whisper will be heard in the place □
Where the ruined
□ House once stood.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים.
לא יצמכו לעולם
פרחים באביב.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים
הוא רמוס וקשה
כמו חצר.

אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים
את העולם לתחוח
כמו חפרפרת, כמו חריש.
ולחישה תשמע במקום
שבו היה הבית
אשר נחרב.