

On Judgment– Erev Rosh HaShana 5778  
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On a still, crisp autumn day, some 23 years ago, a dappled early morning light filtered through my bedroom window to rest upon my bed. The day was about to begin like most. So certain was I of the daily maternal knock on the door that I confidently dismissed my singing-chicken alarm clock, rolled over, and went back to sleep. Being a twelve year old, I had become reliant upon that more personal wake-up call from my mother. She would stand on the other side of my closed door and inform me in varying and simple terms that it was time to get up. This second method was quite effective in its insistence, and significantly more persuasive than the singing chicken. But on this particular morning, I burrowed deeper into the blankets on my bed, a fierce determination taking hold as I remembered that it was Yom Kippur; and that year, I was fed up with the High Holy Days.

This, it would seem, was a Protest Moment and I remember my grievance clearly. The seeds of discontent had been planted the night before during *Kol Nidre* services, and had blossomed in to full-grown rejection by morning. Why on earth, I thought, should I have to spend a day stuck at Temple, wearing uncomfortable clothes, and confessing to sins that I hadn't even had a chance yet to commit? Why should I do all the sitting and the standing and the behaving well, and the chest-beating when I was blameless? Sitting or standing, either way I wasn't having it. And why was God so judgmental and set on reminding us of our mistakes? I could not believe in a God that wanted me to feel ashamed of my mistakes – I did enough of that for the both of us. I can't even imagine what was running through my poor mother's head as she found herself arguing the finer points of theology with her wild-eyed and surly pajama-clad pre-teen. In the end, we both won – or lost – she got me to Temple that day, although I spent the morning in the foyer, just outside the sanctuary doors, arms crossed for the entire service.

As I reflect upon this story, I wonder what, exactly, lay at the heart of my protest? There must have been some real fear lying beneath that stubborn pre-teen exterior. Judgments that others made about me, some that I made about others, and more than a few that I passed upon myself all lurked behind those crossed arms. It's no secret that the adolescent years are some of the most challenging and formative. We start differentiating ourselves from our families of origin and looking to the outside world for approval and validation of who we are and what we have to offer. In hindsight, it makes perfect sense that I would resent the idea of facing judgment in synagogue when it seemed as though the world around me was passing judgment each and every moment. There is a kernel, or two, of that judgmental teenager in each of us, nestled somewhere deep in the human psyche. It is a voice that, at its best and most functional serves to help us distinguish between what is safe and what is dangerous; but, if given too much reign, it is a voice that can paralyze us with fear. As it turns out, the judgments that we talk about during the coming Days of Awe are not like those.

Among its many names, Rosh HaShanah is called *Yom HaDin* – “The Day of Judgment.” We sit here tonight, teetering between the past and the future, encouraged to

pause/ to contemplate our lives / our actions / and our relationships. This is where the connections between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur become apparent. Rosh Hashanah calls our attention to the judgment inherent in renewal – identifying and then letting go of that which no longer serves us so we can make proper use of the next ten days. Just as one revisits the terms of a lease or a contract before diving into another year of commitment, we revisit the terms of our existence: how have we behaved this past year? Have we been true to ourselves, or have we been in service to something else? We are asked to pass these judgments upon ourselves in the presence of a higher, perhaps more omniscient judge; though we may recoil at the idea of being judged. The judgment we speak of when we call this day *Yom HaDin* is not the judgment we encounter within and amongst humanity – it is something quite different. To think that God judges us the way that we judge each other is to seriously underestimate God.<sup>1</sup> Human judgment involves assumptions, educated guesses, Uneducated guesses, and biases galore; Divine judgment takes into account the best of who we are and who we could be, along with an accounting of where we have missed the mark and where we have tried to make things right.

Author Steven Covey used to tell a story of mistaken assumptions to illustrate the fallibility of human judgment. One Sunday morning while riding the subway in New York City, Covey found himself in a train car with a rowdy pair of young children. Prior to their arrival, the train had been calm, with people reading their newspapers and otherwise quietly going about their morning. As the children’s behavior worsened and other passengers became visibly upset, Covey noticed their father, sitting in a silent stupor, not paying attention. His patience having run out, Covey asked the father if he could better control his children. Covey writes, “The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, ‘Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what do think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.’”<sup>2</sup> Covey’s attitude shifted immediately in that moment; from one of judgment to one of compassion and sympathy for this man and his children.

We cannot ever be certain of what a person is going through until we inquire – activating compassion and suspending judgment gives us the opportunity to open up to any number of new perspectives and to have our minds changed. A willingness to see the world from a perspective free from judgment allows us to broaden our capacity for care, to shake off the distractions of shame, and deepen our understanding of what it is to be human by connecting more honestly. When we judge ourselves or when we feel judged harshly, our systems flood with the physiological sensations of shame. The body involuntarily reacts to shame and, in these moments, provides us with instant feedback about the state of our inner worlds. Shame causes us to fold inward, to curl up and lick our wounds, rather than to learn from our mistakes and move onward and upward through them.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Simon Jacobsen, *60 Days: A Spiritual Guide to the High Holidays* (Kiyum Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Covey, Steven *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

In her 2010 book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, mental-health-and-wellness expert Dr. Brene Brown tackles this feeling of shame that arises when we judge ourselves. In it, she outlines the correlation between shame and perfection. “Shame,” she says, “is that warm feeling that washes over us, making us feel small, flawed and never good enough.”<sup>3</sup> In order for shame to flourish in our lives she warns us against feeding it three things: secrecy, silence and judgment.<sup>4</sup> When we are taught to keep our failures secret, rather than using them as a means of growth, we feed our shame. When we cannot speak about our vulnerable moments, or mull them over with trusted colleagues and friends, we feed our shame. And when we hold on to unrealistic standards of perfection, leaving no room for trial and error, we feed our shame. Jewish tradition understands that perfection is not the aim of human life - it is not even possible. The will of spirit, the desire to be moved - to be encouraged - to be forgiven, are far more integral to the health of the human soul.

Ours is a tradition that appreciates the multi-faceted nature of the Divine. God not only interacts with us like a judge and arbiter on this day, but also like a compassionate parent. On this Yom HaDin, we call upon the balancing attribute of *rachamim*, of compassion, to help us navigate the waters of *teshuvah*. We model this practice on the notion that God is Compassionate; which is fundamental to a Jewish view of the Eternal. To this end, there is yet another name for *Rosh HaShanah: Yom Ha Zikaron*, “Day of Remembering.” Typically, when we speak of *Zikaron* it is within the context of the human sense of memory – particularly for those who have died. But *Yom HaZikaron* is about God remembering to remind us of ourselves. It is a day when we ask to be reminded of who we are and what we’re here to do. *Rosh HaShanah* and these Days of Awe offer us the chance to ask those questions and see what thoughts emerge to direct us toward our answers.

The irony is not lost on me that I stand before you tonight as the newest member of your clergy, asking you to reconsider the typical means of judgment. I promise this is not a self-serving sermon (although some do say that clergy are always giving the sermon that they, themselves, need to hear). Luckily for us all, our tradition teaches that Divine judgment is compassionate – awe-and-fear-invoking though the idea of being judged may be.

In a Talmudic argument on the nature of this day of judgment, the students of Hillel the Elder, explain that when those of us who are neither wholly righteous nor wholly evil (and let’s be honest, that’s the majority of us), stand before God our deeds are weighed as if on a scale. If our good deeds outweigh the bad, then all is well. But what if our good deeds and our bad deeds are equally weighted? In such an instance, the sages<sup>5</sup> say, it is as if God places a thumb on the scale, on the side of the good. Another rabbi of the Talmud, Rabbi Jassa, taught that we need only “make an opening for *teshuvah* as large as the eye of a needle, and [God] will make it large enough for wagons and carriages to pass.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, we need only get the ball rolling. The Divine Judge,

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, Brene, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Hazelden, 2010) p.38

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, (p. 40)

<sup>5</sup> *Rosh HaShanah 16a*

<sup>6</sup> Fields, Harvey *Torah Commentary for our Times*, on *Parshat Nitzavim*

full of Compassion is rooting for us; secure in the knowledge that we are far from perfect, but ever-seeking our way in the world. Let us be comforted by the thought that the same God toward whom we turn in judgment is a God that wants us to succeed. And if and when we must pass judgment let us strive to do so with the same compassion we hope to receive.

*L'Shana Tovah*