

Doing What We Know We Should Parashat Ve'Etchanan 5778

The famous storyteller, Aesop, once told a fable about an argument between the sun and the wind. You see, they were trying to determine which of them was the mightiest, and as they were both eternal, world-shaping forces, they were having quite the dispute. Finally, the wind looked down to the earth and saw an old man walking alone down a road.

“See that man?” the wind cried to the sun. “I can make him take off his coat much quicker than you can.”

So, the sun went behind a cloud and the wind blew and blew until it was almost a tornado. But the harder it blew, the tighter the old man wrapped his coat around him. After a long while, the wind gave up and the sun came out from behind the cloud. It looked down on the old man and smiled warmly upon him. Presently, he wiped the sweat from his brow, and pulled off his coat.

The wind was incensed and demanded to know how the sun had tricked the man into taking off his coat. The sun responded by explaining that gentleness, warmth, and compassion are always stronger motivators than force and fury.

The moral of the story is so clear it seems obvious. We are all more motivated to do things, especially things we don't really want to do, when we are

asked by people who love and care for us than when others try to make us do them. We even have clichés and aphorisms like, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” to explain what we all know to be true: kindness motivates. Warmth moves people.

How many of us, however, can honestly say we are always more sun than wind? How many times do we try to force things out of frustration, a need for expediency, or simply just a lack of intention in the moment? I’ll give you an example: how many of you have ever watched a child, maybe one of your own children, or a student, or just a child you know, about to do something they are DEFINITELY not supposed to be doing, like throwing a truck at their brother’s head? I would be willing to bet that few of us, myself included, always react calmly and warmly, taking the child aside and gently convincing them to put the truck down, but instead scream something like, “NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT! NADAV ARYEH SHAFRIN YOU PUT THAT DOWN RIGHT NOW!!!!” Hypothetically speaking, that is...

Why do people do things like this? Why do we react in anger or frustration or vehemence, when we know, and have scientific studies that demonstrate, that it is bad for both our own long-term health and for the health of our relationships with the people in our lives to behave this way?

I think we can find some answers within this week's Torah portion, Parashat Ve'Etchanan. In some sense, this is the Super Bowl of Torah portions, as it contains both second account of the giving of the Ten Commandments as well as the first paragraph of the Shema. Both are sacred, foundational pieces of Jewish life. Indeed, these two texts are so revered that when we gather together in shul and we read them, they even have their own choreography: as we recite the Ten Commandments, we stand, as we did during the 4th aliyah today, and when we say the Shema, we cover our eyes.

But do any of us really need to be reminded of the content of these texts? When you read that "Adonai is our God," in both sections, are we surprised? Is anyone taken aback when we are commanded to guard Shabbat or to honor our parents or to avoid murder? We know that these are basic Jewish tenets, and moreover, they have been told to us before in so many different ways. Why must we be reminded now, here, at this time in our lives?

I believe it has to do with where and how the cycle of Jewish life moves us. Just last week, we observed the holiday of Tisha B'Av, a day generally deemed the most mournful and somber of the Jewish calendar. Leading up to it, we had three separate weeks where we read words from the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah in the Haftorah who admonished the Jewish people and forecasted doom, all to get

us to think outside ourselves, and recall those things that have harmed us, individually and as a people, throughout our past.

And now, we have arrived at Shabbat Nachamu, so named for the first words of this week's Haftorah from the prophet Isaiah (40:1). The goal of all of these so called "Haftorot of Consolation" is to ease us out of the depths of despair brought on by the poignancy of Tisha B'Av and bring us not only back to our normal lives but get us ready for the season of *teshuvah*, repentance, and the start of a new year.

That word, consolation, however, has always bothered me a little. If I am getting ready to do *teshuvah*, to repair my life and my soul, to turn away from the mistakes I have made in the past and to turn toward the best person I can be, shouldn't I be consoled after Yom Kippur, when the work has been completed? Rabbi Alan Lew z"l (of blessed memory) described it best in his seminal work on the High Holiday season entitled *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*:

What is required of us on Tisha B'Av is a simple turn of mind, a turn toward consciousness, a turn away from denial, from inertia, from the passive momentum of our lives, a turn away from those things that continue to happen, unconsciously, and a conscious decision to change...Will we let in the truth that we have been walling out all year long and let this truth help us to stop making the same mistakes again and again? Will we let this moment of consciousness help us break the unconscious momentum of our lives?

On Tisha B'Av, we wept, and on Shabbat Nachamu we are comforted. But if we allow ourselves to slip back into a life of habit, a life that simply goes with the flow, then we miss the opportunity to turn our lives into something more.

That is what *teshuvah* is, an act of radical, spiritual turning away from what is toward the best of what could be. That is what the Shema is asking us to do, to listen with attention to the holy song of creation that is renewed each day. It is echoed in the Ten Commandments who call on us, in each word and phrase, to remember that our desires, our needs, and even our lives are not the center of the universe, that we are part of something larger and grander than any of us can imagine, and that we are given the choice of how to engage in a world of unfathomable sacredness.

Our Jewish Tradition reminds us each of all of these things because we forget them. We forget to make the moments of our lives holy because we get busy. We forget to honor those we know we love because they are human, they make mistakes, and sometimes, they get under our skin. We forget to focus on the world around us because the demands on our attention are too numerous to count.

And so, less than a week after we were told to remember how the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple fell in the time of our forefathers and foremothers, we

are called this Shabbat to begin to let our own inner walls fall. It is never too early to look inside and try to see where we have each missed the mark. And you may think, “Look at this crazy rabbi talking about *teshuvah* when it isn’t even Elul yet!” But time waits for no man, no woman, no child, no family, no community, no nation. Take this Shabbat, this pause the race of our lives, to enter into sacred time, and bring back into the rest of your week a sense of the work you need to do on your own soul.

I want you to look at yourselves, at your lives, and feel wonderful about who you are and where you are going. It only takes a moment to make a knee-jerk reaction, but, more often than not, these are the actions we regret. Instead, take the time to be the sun for someone else. Be intentional with your words and deeds. Mean what you say, and say only what will move life in a positive direction. And add a little more warmth to the world. No one ever gets to the end of their days and says, “I made too many people smile.” I promise that acting lovingly is the best cure for reacting hurtfully. Each of us has the capacity for limitless good in the world, but only if we try.

Shabbat Shalom.