



## Yom Kippur 2009 - If Not Now: Turning A Moment into THE Moment

### Rabbi Sharon Brous

A couple of weeks ago the headline on the front page of the New York Times made me shiver: *A Year After a Cataclysm, Little Change on Wall St.* “One year after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the surprise is not how much has changed in the financial industry, but how little.”<sup>1</sup>



Biggest banks have restructured only cosmetically.

Pay has returned to precrash levels.

Ambitious regulatory changes are not likely to take effect.

In order to feel safe in a world of swirling chaos, we all develop routines that bring some sense of stability, reliability and ordinariness into our lives. But periodically, inevitably, something suddenly bursts through -- death, love, desire, loss – something leaves us with a sense of *rupture*, so intense that our lives may fundamentally change as a result.<sup>2</sup> These experiences *may* fundamentally change us – or they may not. Instability tends to overpower our natural, instinctive resistance to change. Or it could only further entrench us in our old ways, fortifying us against any breach in our defenses.



The truth is, sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same.

But why is that the case? Why doesn't catastrophe or tumult necessarily result in transformation? Why didn't the security at our nation's ports improve dramatically after September 11<sup>th</sup>? Why didn't Hurricane Katrina thrust us into a national conversation on poverty and racism? Robert Schiller, a professor of economics from Yale, suggests that people are likely to accept change in a time of crisis, but if we don't take advantage of the momentum immediately after a rupture, we quickly return to complacency and then change is much more difficult to enact.<sup>3</sup> Others suggest that a cataclysm like the one that struck the American economy requires structural change that is so dramatic, so broad, that there is a general unwillingness to try it. So instead, we spend billions of dollars plugging the dike of a fundamentally flawed model, in an effort to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of trying something completely new. I am reminded of the great teaching by the Slonimer Rebbe that one who builds a home on a rotten foundation must demolish the entire home, clean out the rotten



<sup>1</sup> NYT *A Year After a Cataclysm, Little Change on Wall St.* 9-12-09

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*.

<sup>3</sup> NYT *A Year After a Cataclysm, Little Change on Wall St.* 9-12-09.



foundation, build a foundation that is stable and healthy in its place, and then rebuild the house. Short of that, he argues, cracks will continuously appear in the walls of the home, and we'll spend our time working furiously to paint and plaster over them so that the home has the appearance of normalcy, knowing all the time that it stands on a foundation that is rotten to the core.<sup>4</sup> It takes a lot of courage to break down the house and start again, but if we refuse to do so, we are making a choice to live in a house forever on the brink of utter collapse.



But just as we are about to shake our heads in dismay at the banking industry, the regulators and the lawmakers, I need to ask you this: Most of you sat here last year. Where was your heart on Yom Kippur day? What were you struggling with? What was tormenting you? What caused you pain? What gave you hope? I suspect that many of us left here last year with a desire, even a fierce desire to change our lives – to leave a job, or a relationship. To recommit to a job, or a relationship. To strive to be more patient, more loving, more present. What I suspect many of us probably found was that even the best intentions faded with the setting sun at Neilah -- so that we find ourselves this year one year older and a lot more tired.



Maybe that's why the final of Hillel's three questions is perhaps the most important:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

*If I am only for myself, what am I?*

*V'im lo akhsav, eimatai – if not now, when?*

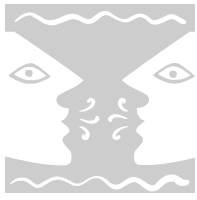


Let's say we take Hillel very seriously and we somehow manage to construct a reality in which we balance self love and responsibility to the world, in which we make manifest our own best selves through a deep and thoughtful engagement with others. None of that means anything if we don't do something about it *now*. So the question for us this morning is: what needs to happen for *a* moment to be transformed into *the* moment? For us not to let the opportunity pass us by, for right NOW to be the moment that changes everything?



The Beit HaMikdash, the Temple in Jerusalem, was the epicenter of Jewish religious life. Cultic ritual was the ultimate expression of connection to God, and the Jews organized their lives, and their calendar, around the Temple – the only place where sacrifices could be offered. It was seen as the

<sup>4</sup> Netivot Shalom, *Teshuvhah*



footstool of the Divine, the resting place of the *Shehina*, God's presence on earth. When the Temple was destroyed in 70CE by the Roman Empire, the Jewish community faced a rupture of unprecedented magnitude. Would God's presence cease to exist on earth? Could Judaism survive without a place to worship God? Could a religious tradition persist without its central organizing principle?



Shortly after the Temple was destroyed, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking with one of his students, Rabbi Yehoshua. When they passed by the ruins of the Temple, Rabbi Yehoshua cried out "What will we do now? Without the Temple, how will we be able to bring sacrifices to atone for our sins?" But Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai comforted him with these words: "Do not be distressed. Now that there is no Temple, we will be able to atone for our sins through *g'milut hasadim* –kindness and love."<sup>5</sup>



And in that instant, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai saved Judaism, making it possible for the religion, and the people, to survive utter catastrophe. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai recognized the fierce urgency of NOW. To wait, to equivocate, would have been to risk losing Judaism forever. So he acted, decisively and creatively, to transform catastrophe into possibility. And what is his response? The response to a world shattered to pieces is compassion. Give love, precisely from the gaping hole in your heart. Just when you hurt the most, just when you most distrust humanity and are angriest with God, respond to loss with love.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's message, therefore, is two-fold: give love, and give it now.



This message reverberates throughout the generations.

The Talmud tells the story of a poor soul named Nahum of Gamzu – whose body was riddled with all manner of physical afflictions. He was blind and paralyzed, and his skin was covered with boils. But he was known to be a righteous man, so in a time when people believed that goodness was rewarded with long life and good health, his condition was befuddling. How did he understand why he suffered so terribly? He explained that he was once walking to his father-in-law's house with a massive delivery of food, drinks, and precious goods (basically a COSTCO run for the in-laws). On his way, he passed by a homeless man who said he was hungry and asked for tzedakah. Nahum told the man that he'd have to wait until he first unloaded all of the goods he had purchased, but by the time he finished unloading, he returned to the homeless man and found him dead on the



<sup>5</sup> Avot d'Rabbi Natan 11a.



ground. Nahum, devastated, fell to the ground and cried out: My eye which had no pity on your eyes – let it be blind! My hands that had no pity on your hands – let them be paralyzed. My feet that had no pity on your feet, let them be amputated. And his mind was not at ease until he said, “Let all my body be covered with boils.”<sup>6</sup>



How many times have we walked by someone in need and said: I’ll get you on the way out? Nahum of Gamzu warns us not to be so patient when it comes to someone else’s suffering. As R’ Israel Salanter famously said: another person’s material needs are my most pressing spiritual needs. There is nothing more urgent, Nahum of Gamzu cries out, than stopping to help someone who needs us now. Give love, and give it now.



A second story: One day, a troubled young man went to Martin Buber seeking counseling. Buber met with the man, but he was busy so he was distracted and not fully present. The young man left his office and committed suicide. When Buber heard this, he understood immediately that the man had come looking for relief from his existential loneliness, hoping to ease his despair through a real human connection. And he realized that had he made the time for an authentic encounter – an I-Thou encounter -- communicating to the young man that he was unique and infinitely valuable, he could have saved his life. Give love, and give it now.

The truth is, every moment presents itself with the opportunity to do hesed, to reach out, in the instant, to bring love and kindness to another person.



A third story: Rabbi Paysah Krohn tells the story of a friend of his whose son, Shay, had special needs. One afternoon, Shay and his father walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, “Do you think they will let me play?” His father knew that the boys would not want him on their team because he was not at all athletic. But he could see how badly his son wanted this, so he hesitantly approached one of the boys to ask if Shay could play. The boy shrugged: “We’re in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning and losing by six runs. Sure – let’s let him play, and we’ll put him up to bat in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning.”



Shay and his father were ecstatic, and Shay, for the first time in his life, entered the game. But then his team scored several runs and the game was close. There were two outs and the bases were loaded when it was Shay’s turn at bat. Would they let him play and give up their chance to win the

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<sup>6</sup> Talmud Bavli, Taanit 21a.



game? They handed Shay the bat. Shay didn't even know how to hold it properly, let alone hit. But, as he stepped up to the plate, the pitcher from the other team stepped close to toss the ball in softly so Shay could make contact.



The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. Without a word, one of his teammates came up and together they held the bat and waited for the next pitch. The pitcher again tossed the ball softly, and as the pitch came in, Shay and his teammate swung at the ball and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher.



The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to first – gotten Shay out and won the game. Instead, he threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling, "Shay, run to first. Run to first." Never in his life had Shay run to first. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball.

He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman, but instead he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head.



Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shay ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home.

As Shay reached second base, the opposing short stop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shay run home." Shay ran home, stepped on home plate and all 18 boys – both teams -- lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.<sup>7</sup>

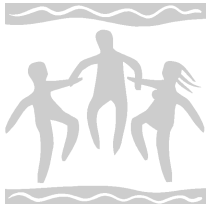


I think of this story not as a prescription for how to treat children with special needs – certainly one could argue against this approach -- but rather as hint of the power of *hesed* – kindness drenched in love – to shape a person's experience of the world. And the power of a moment, just one

<sup>7</sup> Echoes of the Maggid (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, 1999, Perfection at the Plate).



split second, to change a person – or a whole group of people’s lives. I know enough about boys to know how much they care about winning baseball games. And I think it’s *extraordinary* that these 18 boys somehow instinctively understood that they were given *one moment* to demonstrate that there was something worth even more than winning. That sometimes love prevails even over victory.



How many moments that could have changed us forever have we let pass by this past year? How many opportunities to have we missed, because we were reluctant to inconvenience ourselves to care for another person? These might seem like simple questions, but if we take them seriously, they could profoundly affect the way we live. Indeed we are here today *precisely* to ask these questions. Yom Kippur offers a window into our hearts. Why are we so impatient with our partners, our kids, our work, and so damn patient with the loneliness and suffering around us? What would it mean to respond to our uncertainty about our lives, and about the world, with abundant love? And to do it now?



A few years ago I heard Jack Riemer tell a beautiful story about Itzhak Perlman, the great violinist, who performed at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City in 1995.

If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches.



To see him walk across the stage one step at a time is an unforgettable sight, but now, the audience is used to the ritual. They sit quietly while he walks painfully, yet majestically, making his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently silent while he sits down, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.



But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap – it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do.



People who were there that night... figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage - to either find another violin or else find another string for this one. But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before.



Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was re-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before.



When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. They were all on their feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything they could to show how much they appreciated what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."<sup>8</sup>



Maybe this is our challenge as we sort through the chaos of this past year.

Whether the upheaval is national or personal, economic or spiritual, the critical question is the same: will you grasp the urgency of the moment and play, even when you don't have all your strings? Love, even when you don't have all the answers? Be courageous, even – especially – when you don't know how it will all turn out? Your broken strings are not an excuse not to play. Your lost 401k is not an excuse not to live generously. Your unfulfilled dreams are not an excuse not to love.



Our Rabbis taught that "Opening the heart... is a process that involves stumbling, closing... opening. Stopping and starting."<sup>9</sup> We are hobbled, but we are not broken. Hillel's demand is that we are present – NOW – to the

<sup>8</sup> Jack Riemer, Houston Chronicle.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, The Seven Beggars

opportunity to fully manifest ourselves through kindness, through creativity,  
and through love.

