

Teshuvah: What's the Point?

Paul Solyn

SESSION SUMMARY

The *Mishnah* tells us, “For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.” Yet, repairing a relationship with another person is often the most difficult kind of *teshuvah*, even more so if that person is no longer with us. In this workshop, participants studied how the understanding of *teshuvah* has changed through history and how communal and individual *teshuvah* are related. They then practiced the process of beginning *teshuvah* with another person, and finished with a discussion of ways to introduce this process to students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Audience: Any adults from the congregation interested in learning about and/or working through *teshuvah* with someone else or themselves.

Time: 90 minutes

Goals: To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of *teshuvah*, including *teshuvah* with a specific individual.

Enduring Understanding: Although both our practices for *teshuvah* and our beliefs about God have changed since Torah times, the process of *teshuvah* remains meaningful, important, and available.

Source Texts:

Leviticus, ch. 16 (from *humash* or handout)

Liturgy for Yom Kippur (from *Gates of Repentance*)

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, ch. 2 (copy for participants)

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, ch. 4 (2:i, dissociating oneself from the community) (online at <http://www.panix.com/~ijbaker/MadaT.html>)

Story: Lynn Mirvis, "Finding Peace" in *New Mitzvah Stories*, ed. Goldie Milgram and Ellen Frankel (Reclaiming Judaism Press), pp. 177–179) or on video at https://youtu.be/I9_MpsETORc.

Music: Shirona, "Kol Dmama Daka" (<https://youtu.be/bEJ7tCnsjJk>)

Supplies: paper and writing implements

Preparation:

Seating around tables so everyone is facing each other. Place *humashim* or Lev. 16 handouts and copies of HT ch. 2 at each seat.

Have "Kol Dmama Daka," playing.

Activities:

1. Define *teshuvah* – as a group come up with a definition that everyone agrees contains all the meanings of the term. Write it up on a poster where everyone can see.
2. Text Study (choose selections from the following for 15-20 minutes of study/discussion).

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- a. Introduce the ritual from Lev. 16. Note that this is the traditional Torah reading for the morning of Yom Kippur, although our congregation now reads the liberal selection from Deuteronomy. (About half of the participants will have experienced the traditional reading but probably do not remember any of the meaning.) With participants, read and discuss the text. Points to elicit:
 - i. This ritual can no longer be carried out and most of us probably would not want it to be carried out. (We don't believe that blood is "God's favorite detergent.")
 - ii. The High Priest's actions have the purpose of *collective* atonement—*Am Yisrael* atones as a group.
 - iii. Although individual atonement is not central to this ritual, the understanding is that individual sins corrupt the altar and reduce the efficacy of the sacrifices.²
3. Summarize HT ch. 4, emphasizing 2:i as a bridge between collective and individual *teshuvah*.
4. Read *GOR* p. 251: "For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another." (R. Elazar ben Azariah, M. Yoma)
5. With participants, read and discuss HT ch. 2. Note especially sec. 7 ("The Day of Atonement is a time of repentance for all, whether individually or with the community, and completes the pardoning and forgiving of Israel."), and secs. 9–11³.
6. Tell the story, "Finding Peace."
7. **Meditation:** *As we remember our departed family members, some of us may feel that we have unfinished business with one or another of them. We may even feel that we should seek their forgiveness, or there may be something that we wish we had said while they were alive. Maimonides taught that it was possible to ask someone no longer alive for forgiveness: he recommended going to the person's grave in the presence of a minyan and saying whatever needs to be said to accomplish teshuvah.⁴*
8. Have each person write at the top of their paper the name of the person they want to do *teshuvah* with. Remind them that his can be with anyone they want, even if they are not ready to approach the person directly, and including themselves.

Now write all the things you know about the situation and the person that has caused the disconnection or damage.

Let it all out, try to unload everything that is wrong, be as mean as you feel if that is where you're at. This is for your eyes only.

List your feelings about this person. Notice where you feel these in your body as you write.

(Play "Kol Dmama Daka" while participants write.)
9. Stop writing at this point and have everyone face each other. We are going to do a short meditation in a moment.
10. Explain briefly the idea that there are always many things we don't know, even if we

think we know the whole situation. In order to begin Teshuvah with someone, we need to empty ourselves of all the knowledge we have, or expectations of the other person, or yourself.

Meditation: *Treat yourself with care, take a minute to acknowledge your anger, hurt, resentment, whatever feelings have been keeping you from reconnecting with this person. These are real, these are important for your self-survival. Read over your list for a moment, then when you are done, close your eyes.*

Thank yourself for protecting you and sharing these thoughts. Then kindly whisper to yourself that you don't need to hold onto them anymore. These have led to guilt, or other blockages towards healing.

Keeping your eyes closed, imagine you have a large paintbrush and you are painting over the words on your paper, each letter, each word disappears from the page.

What color does the paper change to? A new image begins to form on the page. Examine it, what is there.

On your paper, you notice the person you wrote about is also there looking up at you from the page.

There is a look of gratitude and kindness as this person offers you something in their hands. You accept it, open it. Look at it and see what it is. What gift have you received?

Feel all the negative thoughts for this person melt away, making room to hear their story, learn something new about this person you have struggled with.

From a place of questioning and silence we can begin the process of teshuvah with another.

¹ I am indebted to my colleague Andrea Shupack for many elements of this lesson. We envisioned it as spanning two or three sessions; here it is condensed into one 90-minute session.

² Based on teaching by Dr. Marc Brettler.

³ Section 11 is omitted from the Birnbaum print edition.

⁴ I learned about the procedure in HT:2:11 from Rabbi Goldie Milgram, *Reclaiming Judaism As a Spiritual Practice: Holy Days and Shabbat*, p. 20.



Chapter 24

Finding Peace

by Lynn Mirvis

In *New Mitzvah Stories for the Whole Family*, ed. Goldie Milgram and Ellen Frankel (New Rochelle, NY, Reclaiming Judaism Press, 2014)

Once a king tossed and turned in his royal bed. In the morning, he summoned his advisor.

"I am so upset! I need to find peace," the king cried. "At night, I twist in my bed covers and can't sleep at all, and during the day, all I do is pace up and down the halls. I need peace!"

"Send out a proclamation!" the king commanded his advisor. "Whoever brings peace to the king will be rewarded with up to half of my kingdom!"

The proclamation went forth to all parts of his kingdom as the king had commanded.

Now in this kingdom, there was much poverty. Little ones dazed from hunger roamed the countryside, looking for a scrap of bread, but none was to be had. Farmers worked the land, which was often barren from lack of rain, and the meager crops that somehow survived were heavily taxed to fill the royal treasury.

But the king never noticed how his people suffered.

When the proclamation went forth, many of the king's subjects were too broken in spirit to pay it much attention.

But the royal palace was abuzz with ideas about how to bring peace to the king.

The royal baker decided that he had just the thing to bring the king peace. With a flourish and numerous bows, he entered the royal chambers, carrying on his shoulder a tray of freshly baked croissants. All the nobles in the court were overcome with the delicious aroma of the royal baker's offering.

"Your Majesty!" said the baker, "Take just one bite from these delectable croissants, and you will experience true peace. They are like manna from heaven, made from a recipe passed down to me from my ancestors of old."

The king bit into the delicacy and was transformed. He closed his eyes and felt as if he had indeed found peace. But as soon as he had swallowed the last crumb, the feeling disappeared.

"Perhaps I need more," said the king, and he promptly consumed the entire baker's dozen. Instantly, he was seized with a rumbling in his innards, which didn't subside for a full day and night.

Next came the royal juggler, dressed in purple and red, carrying in one hand a set of golden balls.

"Please, Your Majesty," he said, "watch as I spin these golden spheres in the air. See them sparkle and shine! Watch and you will know true peace."

Up and down, up and down, the royal juggler threw the balls and caught them effortlessly. At first, the king was mesmerized and felt tranquil. But the more he watched, the dizzier he felt. Soon he fell into a swoon, with his head spinning, spinning, spinning, so that he was forced to retreat to his royal bed where he endured a night of vertigo—the walls of his chamber going round and round like a carousel.

Next came the royal dancer accompanied by three fiddlers.

"I beg your indulgence, Your Majesty," said the royal dancer, bowing low. "Allow us to perform before you. You will see that peace can be found in my dance."

And with these words, the dancer glided and pirouetted and spun and leaped high into the air, keeping time with the fiddlers' melody. The king was so delighted that he stood and joined the dancer, and they twirled around the room. Faster and faster, the music played until the king lost his balance, his crown precariously askew. He slipped on the marble floor and would have hit his head on the edge of the throne had not his advisor caught him just in time.

"Why does peace run from me!" raged the king. "Is there no one who can bring me peace?"

Suddenly an old woman, dressed in rags, appeared at the end of the hall. The guards tried to bar her from entering the throne room.

"Let her approach!" the king called out in a desperate voice, for something in the way her eyes searched his face captured his curiosity.

"Your Majesty," the old woman said as she drew near the throne, "I know you desire peace more than anything in the world." The king nodded wearily. "Perhaps I can help. Look deeply into my eyes."

The king peered into her dark eyes, as bottomless as two deep wells. Then she cast her gaze around the vast room.

"All who are gathered here, I beseech you to look deeply into the eyes of the person next to you!"

People gasped, unsure about what to do. For the truth was that they had never really seen each other. Then the king did as she commanded, and the courtiers and ladies-in-waiting followed his example. They all looked into the eyes of the person next to them. And as they did, a hush filled the palace. No sound was heard for miles around. The moment seemed to last for an eternity, as if the whole kingdom were suspended in space.

Each one saw a reflection of themselves in the eyes of the other.

"Ah," said the old woman, "what you see is the *Tzelem Elohim* that resides in each of you, the spark of the Divine image. And when you see that, you understand that the gift of peace—*shalom*—has been inside each of you all along—if only you can see the other."

The king took a deep breath, and for the first time felt peace enter him like a pure, white light. When he looked up, the old woman had disappeared. Yet the special glow inside of him remained very present.

Everyone in court was silent and filled with wonder.

Then the king ordered his servants to bring the royal carriage, for he wanted to see his kingdom.

And as he rode through the countryside, he saw for the first time his own reflection in the eyes of all his people, and they saw their reflection in his eyes. Rich or poor—it didn't matter.

And for the first time, he saw his people's hardships, and vowed to help them. And if I told you all the good he did, and the kindness he bestowed throughout his kingdom, that would be another story. But I can tell you this: from that time on, the King rarely had a sleepless night. He lived in peace and harmony—shalom, shalom—'til the end of his days.

As far as the old woman was concerned, some say they saw her feeding soup to the hungry. Others, that they saw her at the gate of the city, mending the clothes of the poor. And others whispered that she was the *Shechinah*—The Divine Presence—who always hovers over the earth, if only there are eyes to see.

Provenance: When the Early Childhood Department at the Memphis Jewish Community was doing a unit on Peace, they invited me to share a peace story. I created this story that uses the motif of a King's search—my character is reminiscent of Ahashveros of the Book of Esther. I remembered a Buddhist story about a quest for peace that ends with self-discovery, and I realized that the Jewish idea of *Tzelem Elohim* fits with that concept. I am also fascinated by the idea of the feminine aspect of God—the *Shechinah*—and wanted to incorporate that into the story.

When telling this story to younger audiences, I invite them to mime with me eating the baker's delicacies, juggling, dancing, and spinning our heads round and round in sympathy with the King. For all audiences, I invite participants to turn to the person next to them and look into each other's eyes—a very powerful experience.