

## **The Double Whammy**

### **Yom Kippur Sermon 5781/2020**

**By Rabbi Mark S. Glickman**

You've got a scale out there, somewhere. Not the kind with a little digital readout telling you how much you weigh, but the older kind of scale. The kind they used to use in spice markets and gold mines – the kind with two cups, one on either side. On one side of your scale are your mitzvot, the sacred things you've done in your life. On the other side are your sins – your *chata'ot*, the deeds with which you've fallen short. On the first side goes every kind word you've spoken, every Shabbat candle you've ever lit, every act of generosity and compassion that you've ever committed. On the other side goes the bad stuff – the unkind words you spoke, your betrayals, your callousness, your candle-less Friday nights, and your ill-chosen re-tweets.

Do something good and holy, and a weight gets added to the mitzvah side; do something you shouldn't, and a weight gets added to the sin side. The side toward which your scale tips at the end of your life determines your fate. Which will it be?

I've got good news about this scale. Once a weight gets placed on the sin side, it doesn't have to stay there forever. That, of course, is what Yom Kippur is all about. Look at all the misdeeds you committed during the past year. Almost every one of them, our tradition teaches, can be removed from the sin side of your scale. How do you do it? The Jewish answer is very clear – teshuvah, repentance, return. It's a difficult process, and I've discussed it before. It demands that you own up to your responsibility for what you've done, change your behavior, apologize to those you've wronged, and maintain your changes over the long haul – own up, change up, 'fess up, pay up, and keep it up. Do it right, and it will be a difficult, gut-wrenching experience – one that will likely leave you exhausted, utterly spent, and profoundly transformed as a human being.

The message of teshuvah is a powerful one – often more powerful than we realize. Once we do something wrong, we're not stuck forever with the burdens of having misbehaved. That weight on the sin side, as I said, doesn't have to remain there. Teshuvah removes it. We are free to ease the sinward tilt of our scale simply (*simply!*) by atoning for the things we've done wrong. It's hard work, but we can do it.

That, as I said, is good news. But wait, there's more! Teshuvah doesn't only remove a weight from the sin side of our scales, it does even more than that. This is because once the weight is removed, our tradition teaches that teshuvah actually transforms our past misdeeds into *good* deeds. Teshuvah, in other words, doesn't just remove a stone from the sin side of the scale, it actually takes that stone and moves it from the sin side to the mitzvah side. Teshuvah has the magical but very real ability to not only defang and defuse our sins, but actually to transform them into mitzvot. It's the great Yom Kippur double-whammy – neutralizing sin, and then transforming it.

This business about each of us having a scale, and about moving the stones from side to side is a metaphor, of course, but it represents something quite real, indeed.

For example, in my work over the years, I've had the blessing to work with many recovering addicts – people whose lives have been almost destroyed by alcohol, drugs, gambling, or other addictions. Often, these people's lives have to utterly “bottom out” before they get better. They subsume everything to the need of getting their daily fix of whatever it is that they're addicted to. Often, they lose their jobs, they destroy relationships with family members and friends, sometimes they even lose their homes or spend time in jail. These are people whose lives become totally about satisfying their overwhelming needs for whatever it is that the object of their addiction provides.

And then, something happens to change it all. Sometimes, loved ones intervene in a way that reminds them that their lives can be better. Sometimes, things become so bad that the addict realizes that recovery is her only option. Sometimes, their addiction leads the addict to a precipice over which he sees his own mortality, and it terrifies him.

Whatever it is, these people *are* able to turn their lives around, and it is amazing to watch. Whatever it is that enables them to do it, they become stronger than their need for the fix, which means gaining a strength that is almost superhuman. They stop using. They learn how to delay satisfaction. They redefine their very existence. They win over their addiction.

And along the way, I've found that they often do something more. They use the pain of their addiction to become better, sweeter, more profoundly authentic people. In the end, they have a kindness and a richness about them that those of us who haven't experienced their darkness could only dream of. They stop using, in other words, and remove the weight from the sin side of their scale. But then, they keep on growing, keep on enriching their lives, and in so doing they take that weight and add it onto the mitzvah side.

The same goes for reformed criminals, and in fact for reformed transgressors of any kind. The act of changing the course of one's life for the better makes that life richer, fuller, and more textured, not to mention new and improved.

There are people I know who seem to have had charmed existences. They've always been nice people, socially smooth, not to mention financially successful and in possession of full heads of hair that I imagine are neatly combed from the moment they open their eyes in the morning. I'm sure they, too, struggles, even if I don't always know what those struggles are, and I don't for a second mean to stand in judgement of them as individuals.

And yet, the people I often find myself drawn to are the other kind of people. Those who have struggled, those who have looked at themselves, those whose lives have gone astray and who have turned things around. Those who have not had charmed existences, but textured ones – the course of whose lives haven't always been bright, but who have been improving, who were born not with silver spoons in their mouths, but who have made their lives into precious gems of their own. These are the people whose lives put me in a state of awe.

The bottom line, my friends, is this: Yom Kippur reminds us that our lives are not written in stone. Instead, they are malleable, changeable, and improvable. And what's more, if we find in

ourselves something that we don't like, we don't have to get rid of it, because we can do things one step better – we can improve it. And we can come away from the experience transformed.

On these Days of Awe, I often tell our young people a story about a king who owned a precious gem that he loved more than anything else in the world. Every day, the king would look at it, and the light shining through the gem seemed to others to light up the entire room. One day, the king accidentally dropped his gem, and, picking it up, he saw to his horror that the fall had left a big scratch down the side of the stone. He called jewelers from near and from far to fix that scratch, but none of them could. Finally, when the king had almost given up hope, there was a knock on the palace door. It was a local pauper. He had heard that the king needed help fixing his gem, and offered to do what he could. The king set him up in a room with tools, and food and water for a week, after which the pauper emerged with a smile on his face – he had fixed the stone. The king picked up the box holding the gem, opened it up, took one look inside, and smiled. The old scratch on the gem was still there, but what the pauper had done was to carve an image of a flower at one end of it. What was once an ugly gouge in the stone had become the stem of a beautiful rose.

This is what we can do to ourselves. We can take our faults, and make them into something new and beautiful and magnificent.

This year, may we have the strength to do just that. Thus, we will re-create ourselves. Thus, will we transform our world. Thus, will we answer the sacred call of these awesome days.

Shanah Tovah.