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Temple Reyim
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Radical Acceptance

L'shanah tovah.

This past spring, I traveled to the North Shore of Boston to attend the baby naming of the daughter of a close friend of mine who is the rabbi of a synagogue there. When I arrived, I was excited to see so many old friends who had come to celebrate this newborn girl.

I came a bit late and settled into a chair in the back, next to the husband of one of my seminary classmates. I had only recently come to know him, but I was quickly drawn to his wisdom and his good heart. He's a number of years older than me, a professor of geophysics and applied mathematics at a prominent university.

I noticed he was looking down during much of the baby naming ceremony, seemingly distracted. I didn't say anything in the moment but I made a point to sit next to him at the *kiddush* lunch and asked him how he was doing.

I always find it a bit of a risk to ask open questions to professors of geophysics, as there are fairly firm limits of my knowledge of things like solar terrestrial relations, and what do I know is mostly related to an ancient discussion of the Jewish lunar cycle – not a broadly cited source in academic geophysical research. But this afternoon I thought he might be up for someone to just sit and listen.

He had come home early that morning from a 40th high school reunion weekend. He didn't particularly enjoy reunions, and had been dreading this particular one, as his age was starting to show, his hair greying and his body felt more fragile. "You know these events are usually full of lies," he told me. "We try to show how successful we've been and how happy we are. We mostly just end up hiding behind the stories we weave."

"But this weekend was different," he said. "Maybe because we're all approaching 60. I sat down at a table with old friends and some others I actually didn't know that well. We started talking about work and baseball, and we ended up spending the night trying to figure out how to forgive ourselves for **failing to become** who we thought we would be."

I've been thinking a lot about his experience. He's amazingly accomplished in his field. He has a sweet and wonderful family. His friends adore him.

But even as we celebrate achievement and take pride in what we do well, we live with so much regret.

In reflecting on who he wanted to be, my friend touched upon his desire to have done more clinical work rather than teaching. He talked about some missed opportunities for professional advancement and trips he wished he had taken.

But mostly he talked about the image he had of himself as a partner and parent when he was younger: patient and bold and willing to have the most difficult conversations and compromise.

He talked about having failed to repair his relationship with his mother before her dementia caused her to forget that they had ever been estranged. That one was particularly cruel. During the months before she died, he told her he was sorry many times, and she comforted him as a mother comforts a son, not knowing why he was so insistent he had hurt her.

Most of his old classmates talked about similar kinds of experiences.

As we sat together during lunch, the new mother walked by with her newborn daughter and gave us a kiss and thanked us for coming. Just an hour earlier the baby's parents and grandparents and family friends had offered her blessing after blessing, hopes and prayers that she discover and pursue her personal truth and fulfill her wide-open, undefined and unlimited potential.

I wondered where she would be 60 years from now and who would be with her when she discovered she's going to have to forgive herself for not living up to all these blessings we had just bestowed.

There was a study done a number of years ago on the phenomenology of forgiving oneself. For the senior psychologist and his students and colleagues, the essential experience in forgiveness is the "movement from a sense that something is fundamentally wrong with one's life and a feeling of estrangement from oneself and others to a feeling of being at home in one's self in the world. The person moves from an attitude of judgment to embracing who one is. The study showed that forgiveness requires a social context: it is particularly important to experience some kind of loving acceptance from others, especially of those parts of ourselves we find disturbing: anger, hatred, inadequacy, mistakes, ignorance, hurtfulness, alienation, irresponsibility.[1]

The process of forgiveness for who we are is not only a psychological phenomenon, but is at the core of a spiritual, meaningful life.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the great Jewish scholars and teachers during the last century. He was the teacher of my teacher, Rabbi Art Green, and in many ways a source of the spiritual life that is at the core of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College where I studied. Rabbi Heschel wrote a number of books on the nature and presence of God and how we might become aware of that presence more mindfully, more passionately.
He was known to stand in front of a group of students and community members at evening lectures and begin by calling out, "my friends, a miracle has just occurred" in his thick Ashkenazi accent, and as the room settled in and attention piqued, he'd share the miracle: "the sun has gone down"… then he would say a prayer and begin his teaching.

[1] Wounds Not Healed by Time, Solomon Schimmel, p. 128-9

In one of his better known personal and theological reflections, Rabbi Heschel wrote, "Our goal should be to live life in **radical amazement** . . . get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

Rabbi Heschel calls us to awareness, wonder and amazement of what's external to us: the gift of time and the miracle of the natural world.

But, raised and trained in the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Heschel is not primarily interested in the external. His concern is the internal spiritual life.

When we look inward, openly and honestly, can we take that notion of radical shift in perspective and come to truly accept our lives? When we ask the questions my friend asked – "am I the person I thought I'd be? I hoped I'd be?" – can we accept the essential truth of who we are and how we have lived? If we can, if even for a passing moment during these days of repentance, we might begin to forgive ourselves for failing to become who we thought we would be.

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Our High Holidays are a dramatic and intensive time for us to reflect on these questions: for a religious tradition that is focused on the vibrancy and joy and miracle of life, many of the prayers, poetry and melodies of our holiest days speak to us about death. We're taught: if you truly want to be kinder, more generous, more patient, more forgiving, more radically accepting, we need to physically and emotionally confront the fragile and fleeting nature of our lives. If we can find a way to encounter the end of our lives ritually, we might learn something about how to live.

So on these days we wear a *kittel*, the same white, linen fabric in which we are buried.

During Yom Kippur, we recite the *vidui* throughout the day, the prayer of confession that we also recite in the final moments of our lives. And we refrain from eating and drinking, the sources of physical vitality and nourishment of life.

Jewish ritual around death and mourning gives us insight into the meaning of living, and the idea of radical acceptance is at the heart of these rituals. I want to share two of these rituals with you.

The first is *keriyah*, meaning to tear. After suffering a loss of an immediate family member, we rip our clothing, or a ribbon that is placed by our hearts, and we wear that ripped garment throughout the period of mourning. The physical tear is meant to express the internal feeling of a torn heart. But it also forces us to acknowledge the reality of the loss. There has been a tear, a ruptured, that cannot be fully mended and restored.

The death of a loved one is almost impossible to immediately accept, but so many people have shared with me that the echo of *keriyah* stayed with them, stored somewhere in their associative memory, and in the months – sometimes years – to come, they drew on that memory to begin to accept the loss.

The second ritual is *mechila*, or forgiveness. As the person we have lost is before us, we take one final moment to ask for forgiveness for pain we caused, for words that needed to be said and were not. And we take one final moment to forgive both our loved one and ourselves.

These rituals of mourning are our touch points for living: accepting radically, and forgiving generously.

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Radical acceptance can be transformative, but ultimately, it is troubling if it does not open a path to *teshuvah*, to repentance and growth. Acceptance can so easily also settle into resignation, inhibiting our courage to protest, to challenge, to aspire, or to seek repair in relationships that are broken, or overpowering our spirit to be more patient and kind and generous with the people we love.

During my training as a rabbinical student, I spent a number of months as an interfaith chaplain in the neurological intensive care unit and two neurological step-down units at Massachusetts General Hospital. Patients often came to the ICU with severe head traumas,

or had tumors requiring high-risk surgery, so much of my work was end-of-life pastoral and spiritual counseling for patients and their families.

There was one older man I came to know well. He was recovering from surgery and fell in and out of critical condition. I spent many hours in this older man's room, often just sitting by his side. In moments of clarity, he talked to me about his regrets. During one visit, he began to tell me about his children, and in the middle of a simple story about the schools they attended and the subjects they studied, he literally wrapped his hands around my head and pleaded, "What have I done?"

There wasn't any single act or rupture in his relationship with his children. No violence or trauma or explicit breach of trust. And yet in his last days he was mostly alone; they had just come naturally to accept the growing distance that took place among them during many years apart.

One of my favorite contemporary American authors, Stephen Dunn, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry, captures this tension between acceptance as a path to forgiveness and healing or a path to distance and apathy in a poem called Long Term. He is writing about a kind of loneliness that we experience even in a relationship with someone we know well and love. It goes like this:

"…Everything that can happen between two people happens after a while or has been thought about so hard there is almost no difference between desire and deed. Each day they stayed together, therefore, was a day of forgiveness, tacit, no reason to say the words.

It was easy to forgive, so much harder to be forgiven.

The forgiven had to agree to eat dust in the house of the noble and both knew this couldn't go on for long…

The forgiver would need to remember the cruelty in being correct.

Which is why, except in crises, they spoke about the garden, what happened at work, the little ailments and aches their familiar bodies separately felt."

The poem points us to a hard but common experience: we are lonely even in our closest relationships.

And it suggests why we so often come to accept that loneliness: because having the courage to ask for or offer forgiveness can be so hard.

One of the important moments in the poem is the description of the person who comes to ask, "forgive me." He or she has to "eat dust in the house of the noble;" a recognition of the vulnerability and loss of pride in seeking forgiveness.

And the one who needs to forgive, too, must be courageous, because to truly forgive is not just to call up sympathy or even kindness; it's also to know that being correct can be cruel, particularly if we have insisted on it.

What's so striking about this poem is that like the older man in the ICU I described, there is no single act, no sudden rupture or trauma – and yet there is so much silence, so much left unsaid. The couple ultimately and very naturally comes to accept the loneliness that takes place, even as they live together. So they talk about gardens and work and the ailments in their bodies.

Even the people we love the most, the ones we have chosen to spend the most intimate moments of our lives with, our spouses, our parents, our children, may never be the people we need them to be – or want them to be. Our question is: can we forgive them for that? Truthfully, that's where our powers of radical acceptance may need to be most deeply activated.

But there is a great redemptive moment in this poem, and it is captured by its title. The title is not "All is Lost." That would have been a very different poem. It is called "Long Term." Both partners in this couple have come to accept their loneliness. But they are still together. There is a still a shared life. They are still talking. There is still enormous potential for radical acceptance of one another to be a sustaining source for renewal of their relationship, not a source for resignation and distance.

What makes acceptance of our selves and others radical is, of course, that it is so counter cultural. The social messages that flood our conscious and subconscious inboxes focus on overcoming or even erasing our flaws, photo shopping out the uniqueness of our human form. As a parent I'm worried about these messages on the psyche of my own children, with their impact on the human soul.

To teach us otherwise, Judaism elevates the spiritual principles that each of us, in all our fullness, is made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine, and that we reflect the Sacred light that surrounds us and flows through us.

We come together as a community to absorb the light of that reflection; to remind each other to be radical in our acceptance, so that we can begin a process of forgiveness.

May we pursue this process with care and generosity.

May we let the essential truth of our lives shine.

And may we always hold onto the possibility of reconciliation and healing.

Lshanah tovah.