

Rabbi Holub's talk, YOM KIPPUR 2020

I don't remember your birthday. I promise I don't. And even if I do, I won't remember to send you a card. And if you have me over for dinner (remember when we used to have people over for dinner?) I will have a wonderful time and enjoy myself thoroughly. And I won't send you a thank you note, probably not even an e-mail. It's not a good thing about me. I'm not proud of this. All my life I have wished that I were more gracious in these ways, and I admire very much those people who do send little notes and bring thoughtful house gifts when they come over. Those small gestures show attentiveness and respect. They bring ease and pleasure and communicate appreciation — all things I want to do.

And I'm 62 years old, and I've felt bad about this since I was a little girl. And I still haven't managed to train myself or force myself to be graceful and gracious in these ways. Just today, as I am sitting down to write this, in order to clear some space on my desk (and let's not even talk about all my stacks and heaps everywhere...) there was a card I had written months ago to our three-year-old grandson, whom, I'm told by his mother, wishes every day that a piece of the mail she brings in the house would be for him. I wrote it. I put it in an envelope and addressed it. I sealed it. And there it sat, for all this time. Now they're moving house, and I don't even have their new address yet. Today I finally tossed the card in the trash. So at what point do I say, "This is just how I am, and it's not likely to change?"

Thank you notes and birthday cards are a trivial example. There are things I much more wish I could change about myself (and I'm not going to tell you what they are, but they're probably evident...)

Rambam says — and I hope many of us know this pretty much by heart — that if we wrong someone we must:

Confess our sin in detail (not just "If I've hurt you in any way I'm sorry...")

Feel remorse for our sin;
Repair the damage in every way possible;
When the opportunity next arises, do not repeat the same bad behavior.

Many an Elul over many a year I have wrangled with the ways I repeat the same sins over and over. I apologize. I feel terrible. I do my best to assuage hurt feelings. And then the next year I do the same thing again — usually to someone else but sometimes even again to the same person, maybe to myself, maybe to our planet, maybe to God..

Some things about me feel intractable and irreparable. And as I sit with the endless frustration and grief of this, I feel helpless — and stupid and wimpy and lacking in will to change things that I SHOULD be able to change. I feel defective.

As I consider this I find myself mulling on words I read this past year that come from a very different context. Please don't confuse the two. Disability activist Eli Clare writes:

When non-disabled folks ask me whether I'd take the imaginary cure pill for cerebral palsy, they're asking me to engage in a fantasy on so many levels. The technology doesn't exist, nor is it in the making, unlike the promised cures for breast cancer, diabetes, autism. The question is nothing but a thought experiment that underlines the devaluing of disability.

I know what my answer is supposed to be. "Yes, of course I'd take the pill in a heartbeat." And when I don't, they're puzzled and disbelieving. They wonder if I protest too much or am defending myself against the unpleasant truth of my misery. How can I possibly not want a cure?

It's simple. Having shaky hands and shaky balance isn't as awful as they imagine, even when I slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time. My relationship to gravity is ambivalent. On mountain trails I yearn to fly downhill, feet touching ground, pushing off, smooth and

fluid. Instead on steep stretches I drop down on my butt and slide along using both my hands and feet, for a moment becoming a four-legged animal. Only then do I see the swirl marks that glaciers left in the granite, tiny orange newts climbing among the tree roots, otherworldly fungi growing on rotten logs. My shaky balance gives me this intimacy with mountains.

I would lose so much if that imaginary cure pill actually existed. Its absence lets me be unequivocal. It opens the door to brilliant imperfection. (Brilliant Imperfection pp. 87-88.)

Okay, here's a thought experiment I offer to myself, and to you — also only possible because this treatment doesn't exist. And let me say again that I in no way equate physical disability with any kind of morality, good or bad or other. That said, here's my thought experiment for you tonight: If there were a pill you could take, and it would totally and permanently repair all your moral shortcomings, would you take it?

I'm going to stop right here and take that pill. Poof! It worked! That aggravating voice in me that says, "I should send so-and-so a note" and then thinks of a hundred reasons that I won't have the right thing to say, and none of the cards I keep for such a gesture are just right, and if I do then they'll be embarrassed and resentful and think I am just trying to show them up, and I don't have any stamps anyhow, and that deeper mystery that reaches up from my inner swamp and sabotages my good intentions and makes me lose the card or the address or the stamp or get distracted and forget — all that has vanished. The snippet of memory of being seven or eight years old and being told to write a thank you note for a check in a card that I never even saw, much less spent, that's gone too. All the weird and unsavory mix of my childish greed and disappointment around birthday presents, vanished. Now the thought no sooner occurs to me to do a pleasant and gracious thing for someone and I do it and complete it and bring pleasure to someone else.

Who am I then?

There was a beautiful essay in the New York Times a few weeks ago (9/16/20) by the literary scholar Robert Zaretsky, who was volunteering in a local nursing home during the COVID crisis (I am not even sure of the grammar of this last phrase — since the COVID crisis, which is ongoing and escalating, began...) Zaretsky writes of the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who wrote very powerfully of the moral imperative that arises from the distinct otherness of another person. Here is Zaretsky explaining Levinas:

“Le visage,” or the face, happens to be the very grounding for the ethics proposed by Levinas. Indeed, what he understands by the words “face” and “ethics” have little to do with their common usage. For Levinas, the face is not the sum total of physical pieces — nose, eyes, ears, mouth etc. — that we present to the world. Instead, the face, as Levinas frames it, marks what is utterly other than those specific physical features. As [Levinas] declared in his book Totality and Infinity, the face is the naked and living presence of the Other.”

Zaretsky tells a story of driving to work and seeing a panhandler at an intersection trying to get his attention. He speaks of her stringy hair, her red face, her gesturing to get his attention. He asks himself, “Will I allow myself to see her? Or will I allow the inevitable bottleneck of questions and rationalizations to come between us before driving away?” Zaretsky goes on:

“In this moment, Levinas would argue, the panhandler’s real face is revealed to me. It is a face that ‘cannot be assembled,’ like a puzzle, into a recognizable type. It is a face that I cannot colonize by assigning it an identity. It is a face that, if only for a moment, shears away my own self and shoves before me my responsibility to humankind. It is a face, finally that in Levinas’ words, “dechire le sensible” — strips away what is sensible and reveals what is transcendental.”

To the excruciatingly demanding moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, what is commanding about the other is not our human commonality, our shared fate — but the fact that each person is unique and infinite, the only one of his or her or their kind — so that an encounter with the other “strips away what is sensible and reveals what is transcendental.”

Rebecca Solnit, in an essay I love called “The Blue of Distance,” (A Field Guide to getting Lost, p. 31) quotes the mystic Simone Weil, who wrote to a friend on another continent: *“Let us love this distance, which is thoroughly woven with friendship, since those who do not love each other are not separated.”* Solnit goes on: *“For Weil, love is the atmosphere that fills and colors the distance between herself and her friend. Even when that friend arrives on the doorstep, something remains impossibly remote: when you step forward to embrace them your arms are wrapped around mystery, around the unknowable, around that which cannot be possessed. the far seeps in even to the nearest. After all we hardly know our own depths.”*

“Let us love the distance” between us and even our dear friend. Even when she appears on our doorstep, our arms are wrapped around a mystery. The face of our friends strips away what is sensible and reveals what is transcendental.

I think of my own best friends, many more or less the same model that I am — similar age, similar background, similar on the outside. But truly so deeply mysterious, so utterly other than I am, Others who approaches the world so differently than I do, so that I never stop being fascinated. Otherwise why would I even be interested in the thousands of hours of conversation we’ve had?

We are each distinct and deeply mysterious beings. This is as much true of Robert Zaretsky, in his car at an intersection, struggling to make himself behave ethically towards the panhandler, as it is of the panhandler herself. He is as infinitely complex and unique and

transcendental as is she. She could, as much as he, have been dazzled and humbled by the beauty and mystery of the morally struggling academic in his car on his way to work, trying to be kind, trying to really see her in all her grandeur, maybe even having the inspiration that very minute, to go serve dinners to patients at the local nursing home during COVID. And maybe she did.

There is no perfect human model. Not Robert Zaretsky or his panhandler or Emmanuel Levinas or Simone Weil or Eli Clare. We are each brilliantly imperfect, with our own distinctive flaws and limitations, our scars and anxieties, our sharp points and our well-worn folds, all of which enable us to perceive the world and move in it as only we can. All of which — including our flaws and failures — give us the visage that makes us each a transcendent being.

Perhaps a piece of the journey of Yom Kippur is to turn the gaze that Levinas recommends we extend to the other, back upon ourselves, to look at our own *visage, our own face*, as we wish to look at the face of our beloved friend across the ocean, even, perhaps, as God looks upon us. Perhaps, with the help of a night and a day of fasting and prayer and introspection, with the distance that this provides from our momentary ups and downs, we can gaze upon ourselves as every bit the miracle that anyone else is.

Yes, indeed, *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi*. And where we have caused damage, we should try to fix it. And if we can refrain from doing the same kind of damage again, we should refrain. But there is a piece of discernment that needs to be undertaken here: what is a fault I can fix, and what is simply — or not at all simply — the truth of who I am?

The truth of who I am. Which is what I am hoping to grow into. Not an airbrushed and botoxed model of a perfect being, but my true face, with all its brilliant imperfection, its depths, its mystery. *Hashiveinu*, we say over and over — we will return, return us... I hope we are each able to

let go of the idea that there is a perfect self to become and return to the brilliant and flawed and holy face that is our own.