

One of my favorite Jewish stories is the “Prince Who Thought He Was a Rooster” by the nineteenth century Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

Once there was a prince who went mad and insisted he was a rooster. He sat on under the table naked, clucking and eating his food off the floor. The king and queen tried talking to him, but he ignored them. They sent in magicians and doctors, each promising to cure him of his strange illness, but none succeeded.

One day a sage said, “I can cure the prince, but you must leave me alone with him for one year.” Desperate, the royal couple agreed.

The sage was put in the room with the prince who continued to cluck and peck at the floor. After standing there awhile, the sage began to take off his shirt, then his pants. A short while later he, too, was naked under the table; and then began to cluck along with the prince.

A day or two later, the sage began to put on his pants. After saying nothing before, the prince who thought he was a rooster suddenly spoke up. “What are you doing? You are a rooster – a rooster can't wear pants.”

“Who says a rooster can't wear pants?” the sage replied. “Why shouldn't I be warm and comfortable, too? Why should the humans have all the good things?” The Rooster Prince thought about this for a while. The floor under the table was very cold and uncomfortable. So he asked for pants, too, and put them on.

The next day, the old teacher asked for a warm shirt, and began to put it on. Again the Rooster Prince objected: “How can you do that? You are a rooster - a rooster doesn't wear a shirt!”

“Where is it written ‘a rooster cannot wear a shirt?’” the sage replied. “Why shouldn't I have a fine shirt, too? Why should I have to shiver in the cold, just because I'm a rooster?”

Again the Rooster Prince thought about it for a while, and realized that he was cold, too - so he put on a shirt. And so it went with socks, shoes, a belt, a hat and so on. Soon the Rooster Prince was talking normally, eating with a knife and fork from a plate, sitting properly at the table.

When the king and queen opened the door at the end of the year they were astonished to see their son – as normal as he once was. After that the sage would, on occasion, come to visit and join the royal family for dinner. Sitting across from one another, they would look into each other's eyes. To everyone else in the palace the prince appeared as any other, but the sage and the prince knew the truth – that inside the prince was still a rooster.

This story has a slapstick quality that allows it to be presented in a hilarious manner to children. Suffice it to say I once told this story at camp completely embarrassing my children as I proceeded to take off articles of clothing, with campers yelling back and forth “take it off” and many others, “keep it on.”

The rabbi who told this, however, did not intend to tell a comic tale. Nachman of Bratslav (also known as the Bratslaver) was a man with a deeply serious, even dark, side.

Only 38 years old when he died – and an outstanding, profound thinker – he also suffered from great psychological anguish and personal tragedy (including the death of his only son and wife). Nachman fluctuated between feelings of grandeur – including the belief that he was the messiah – and anguish about his sinfulness. Subject to rapid mood swings and even paranoia, it is not without reason that Arthur Green, a contemporary writer, calls the Bratslaver the “Tormented Master.”

The Rooster Prince was a mirror of Nachman of Bratslav’s life – and ours. The central character seems to be a man of dignity and royal bearing, but inside he is a self-absorbed, pleasure-seeking animal – the rooster a symbol of unbridled sexuality and desire. His tale is one that resonates even in our time, for are we not filled with the same self-doubts, alienation from faith and despair that wracked his soul?

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about “the other” outside of us. I reflected on the place of those who are not Jewish, yet are in the midst of Jewish families and of the Jewish community. I offered a perspective on Ishmael and Isaac, metaphors for the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians as strangers to one another. But “the other” is not always one outside. In fact, as the Bratslaver understood, we all carry a sense of the “stranger” within ourselves.

In a bold, counter-intuitive midrash the medieval mystical text, the Zohar teaches: “Yom Kippurim? *Yom Ke-Purim!*” [Tikkunay Zohar 57b] The Day of Atonement (*Yom ha-kippurim*) is, they punned, a day (Hebrew *yom*) like (in Hebrew *ke*) Purim.

At first glance this seems an odd comparison. Could two Jewish observances be any more different? Yom Kippur is a day of self-denial. We refrain from bodily pleasures. On Purim we indulge ourselves – eating and drinking almost to excess. One is a day for introspection, meditation and repentance; the other is a day for clowning and having a good time. What could these two days conceivably share?

The answer is that both holidays focus on the masks we wear. On Purim we don masks, a reflection of Esther who hides her Jewish identity, her true self. On Yom Kippur, we are unmasked. Today we face ourselves as we really are, without pretense and without cover-up. This day is a day when the rooster within is revealed. We can fool those at work, we can hide who we are from our children, we can lie to our lovers

and spouses, but on Yom Kippur our true self is revealed. You and I can not hide before God. Asked to focus on who we really are, we see revealed our painful desires, our anguished despair, the failures of our lives and disappointments in our relationships.

Yom Kippur forces to confront something about ourselves we would rather not see, though that revelation can come at any moment. In an interview with David Letterman this summer the actor Johnny Depp told how this happened to him. A number of years ago he was driving down Pico Boulevard by the 20th Century Fox studio in Los Angeles. Looking up he saw a huge billboard for a movie that he was in that showed him holding a gun. The billboard read, "Other kids pack lunch." Upset by the sign, he decided on a rather unique solution. He commandeered a friend and went to the hardware store to buy some paint, brushes and rollers. About two in the morning they drove to the billboard, climbed up and began painting. Depp just finished covering up the gun when a security guard came by. "What are you doing?," he asked, and then, looking at Depp and then the board said, "Hey, that's you!"

In his typical understated style he answered, "Yeah, I know."

"Well, what are you doing?"

"I don't like it," Depp replied. "I think it's wrong."

The security guard took one more look at Depp, at the billboard and then looked at his watch. "OK," he said, "Hurry."

I don't know enough about Johnny Depp to vouch for his general moral character, but in this case he understood that there are moments in life when we are faced with a decision that reflects something important about who we are. Just driving along he was faced with that which made him see himself as a stranger. And the security guard, too, understood that while Depp's vandalism was wrong, perhaps there was something even more awry in a billboard that portrays guns as something kids do.

In our lives we all have parts of us we do not like – although rarely are our faults or less than admirable qualities posted on boards for all who pass by to see.

The traditional Jewish blessing recited when see a large group of people gathered is "Praised are You God, Knower of secrets." The blessing hints to the reality of our lives. We all carry our secrets. And only rarely – and often with great emotional effort and

inner pain – can we reveal the truth to others. And the wrongs we do are often done in secret.

Many of us (maybe most?) hide our wrongdoing. After all, who but the most wicked or arrogant would advertise their sins? Embarrassed, worried about the consequences of letting others know how we have failed or not wanting to appear weak, we devise all kinds of ways to conceal from others our frailties and sins. How good we can become at compartmentalizing the negative parts of our selves! And how adept become the rationalizations. “I’m basically a good person, so it is OK if I do this.” “I know it’s wrong, but I’m only hurting myself by doing this.”

But is that true? First, you act in ways you sense is wrong, even if no one else seems to know, it damages you. In Woody Allen’s haunting movie *Lies and Misdemeanors*, a prominent ophthalmologist, Judah Rosenthal, has his mistress murdered. At first grief-stricken with guilt, he eventually finds a way to compartmentalize his feelings of remorse as time passes and no punishment occurs. Paralleling Judah’s anguished journey in the movie is that his rabbi, Ben, is slowly losing his sight. It is Allen’s metaphor for God’s blindness to human wrongdoing. Whenever I see the film, however, I am struck by the emptiness of the doctor at the end of the movie. He escapes legal punishment – and even the shame of his immoral act is fading – but in the face of the other loving relationships in the movie, his life seems not just evil, but pitiable. Is this not true for any of us? If we come to terms to with our selfishness, greed and self-indulgence do we not, as it were, see the rooster, but not the royal soul, within? Failing to admit our wrongdoing, then, is damaging.

A second problem with hiding is that few of us are good enough actors to lie so well that others do not, eventually, catch on. Think about your own life. How often have you tried to keep something secret, only to have someone who knows you well – a spouse, a co-worker, a friend – ask you, “c’mon, what’s wrong?” And what of the loss of productivity and energy that come from the fear we might be discovered, the anguished and sleepless nights we torment ourselves?

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* Rabbi Ben says to Judah, “We went from discussing a small infidelity to the meaning of existence.” Without knowing the truth of Judah’s life,

the rabbi hints to how the wrongs we do (what we may believe to be but a “small infidelity”) have a way of defining us. The words are an echo of those of Rabbi Akiva, who, two millennia ago, taught: “At first sin seems as thin as a spider's web, but in the end becomes thick like a ship's rope.” William Shakespeare played with the power of the conscience, as well. Thus, the murders perpetrated by Lady Macbeth ultimately lead her to madness. “Out, dark spot,” she cries, but sin is not so easily cleansed.

Our wrongs, then, do diminish us. They lead us to feeling that we are less than we can be. Feelings of shame can sap our emotional and physical energy. More than that, the “dark spots” in our life are all, in time, revealed – if not to others, than certainly the truth is known to ourselves and God.

The Day of Atonement is not, however, just about honest self-appraisal. This day also teaches us that recognition of our failings is actually a necessary first step towards turning our lives around. Reflection on our weaknesses and faults is not meant to lead us despair. In fact the goal is the very opposite.

The sage in Bratslaver's story did not “cure” the prince of feeling he was a rooster. Rather, he helped the young man realize that one could live as a prince even with his desires. In this way, Nachman of Bratslav taught the classic Jewish belief that to be in God's “Royal Image” lives side-by-side with our brokenness, imperfection, sin and failure. What distinguishes the prince from the rooster is the ability to live beyond the moment, imagining a better self. In a play on the verse in Torah where God says human beings are made “in our image” (*kidmuteynu*), the Bratslaver connected the Hebrew word for “image” (*d'mut*) with the “imagination” (*dimyon*). It is the human ability to imagine something different than what is – to look beyond the needs of the moment – he argues, that distinguishes us.¹ We do not, then, seek to abandon our animal self, only to know that we are not constrained by it.

What prevents us from believing that we can be better is fear – a fear of being revealed, a fear of not being loved, a fear that in admitting our wrong we will forget to love ourselves. The Bratslaver realized that despair is the most powerful obstacle to

¹ Likkutim II, 5:9 on Genesis 1:26; this idea was suggested by Rabbi David Meyer

positive change. “Feel no sadness because of evil thoughts,” he taught, “it only strengthens them.” In short, you have power over your life ... and your destiny.

We can, in short, create ourselves anew. Who you were is no determinant of who you can be. This human capacity for re-creation is what the eminent twentieth century Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik sees as the essential human reflection of the Divine capacity. Fittingly for this season of the year, Soloveitchik understands the concept and the process of *teshuvah*, repentance, as an act of creation, the creation of one’s very self. “The severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous ‘I,’ and the creation of a new ‘I,’ possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals,” he argues, “is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.”²

You can change. You can, like God, make life anew. Never underestimate your gifts. And if you do despair of yourself, allow the respect and/or love others to wash over you, inspiring you to imagining yourself as you wish you could be. A story underscoring this point is told of a father who once heard his son pray before bed, “Dear God, help me grow up to be the kind of man my father is.” Later that night, before going to sleep, the father prayed, “Dear God, help me be the kind of man my child wants me to be.” Before you go to sleep tonight, maybe this can be *your* prayer – “help me be the person I want to be ... I can be.”

There is a Hasidic tale that tells of a grandfather watching his grandson playing hide-and-seek. As the little boy counts, all the other players run away, so that when he goes searching for them they are nowhere to be found. When he comes crying to his grandfather, with tears in his eyes the older man says, “So it is with God. God says, ‘seek me!’, but no one looks.”

I had heard that story many times, but never have I felt it more than this year as we became – albeit temporarily – empty-nesters. After our son left for Israel we took a week settling both our daughters at college. I thought I was doing fine with everyone

² Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Translated by Lawrence Kaplan, JPS, Philadelphia: 1983, p. 99ff.)

going off on their own until we pulled into the driveway. The words of the band the Weepies played in my mind, "The whole is moving and I'm standing still ... I thought of you and where you've gone, and the world spins madly on, and the world spins madly on." I began to cry, realizing how much I already missed them. "Now I know how God must feel," I said to Anne.

So here we are again – the day we come in our largest numbers – seeking ... what? Is it God? Is it something else? Whatever you look to find, allow yourself the possibility that the reason we find God so rarely may be tied up in how rarely we seek our true selves. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai expresses God's longings – and connection to us even when we think God is missing – in his poem titled "Revelation":

Today God revealed Himself to me
Like this:
Someone put His hands over my eyes
From behind:
Guess who?³

Yom Kippur is the reminder that we need not be strangers – not to ourselves and not to God. The rooster crows within our hearts, but planted there, too, is a touch of the divine, the noble spark that makes each of us worthy. Take off the mask. Do not despair. Like God, create a new world – a new world made right by imagining yourself as you might be. You are a daughter of the Divine. You are a son of Eternity.

And when God says, "Guess who?" offer in whispered response, "I love you" – and don't worry if it is a little unclear whether it is God you are talking to ... or yourself.

³ "Revelation" by Yehuda Amichai in *Now in the Storm*, Poems, 1963-1968