

There is almost nothing as daunting for a rabbi than preaching his or her first High Holyday sermon in a new congregation. We want the words to resonate with all gathered, for people to laugh, cry and decide that this is the moment they will take our words to heart and transform their lives. An entire congregation of souls converted. Exciting- yes, realistic- no. And so, today, if I am able to reach just one of you- just one, than I will have made a difference. But I am asking you all to be present and listen, because just as we never know- according to Jewish tradition- the package that the messiah will arrive in- we never know who among us will be open to hear the message. It may be your life that is somehow touched and changed.

I love going to the movies- especially good movies- they offer the possibility of escape from our everyday lives. We, as viewers, can get lost in a story that makes us think or feel deeply. The seats may be uncomfortable, the floors sticky, our neighbors chewing or talking loudly, but the plot and the characters take us into their world for a short time- where we have the potential of experiencing epiphany.

One of the most moving films of the past year was Antoine Fisher, which zeros in on the universal need for self-identity, sense of worth and rooted ness. The title character, a young African American Naval cadet, searches for his true nature through reliving a past of abandonment.

The movie opens with an Antoine, a soul alone amidst the companionable cacophony of naval life, choosing to see slights where they don't exist and using his fists to communicate emotion. After a physical confrontation with a senior officer, Antoine is ordered into counseling with naval psychiatrist Jerome Davenport.

During the first sessions, the angry young man refuses to speak, obstinately crossing his hands over his chest and glaring at the therapist. When he realizes that this game will not work and that therapy involves communication, he

begins to gradually reveal a childhood of horrific proportions. Born to an incarcerated, self-involved, drug abusing mother, and a deceased father, Antoine, abandoned, homeless and nameless is placed into the foster care system. At the age of 5, he goes to live with the Tates, where he is physically, sexually, verbally and emotionally abused. Antoine's only refuge is Jesse a neighborhood friend, who, in the end, betrays and abandons him as well.

Through the telling of his story, we are struck by the enormity of this young man's suffering at the hands of those who were supposed to offer love, support and nurturing. It is no wonder that he is a lost adult, unable to find his place in the world.

Antoine writes: "Who will cry for the little boy, lost and all alone? Who will cry for the little boy, abandoned without his own? Who will cry for the little boy? He cried himself to sleep. Who will cry for the little boy? He never had for keeps. Who will cry for the little boy? Who knows well hurt and pain. Who will cry for the little boy? He died and died again. Who will cry for the little boy? A good boy he tried to be. Who will cry for the little boy, who cries inside of me?"

When the adult grasps that he is able to cry for the lost little boy inside of himself, he gains the ability to state his name with understanding, accepting who he is and how his past affects his present reality. He is able to say Hineni: here I am as I am.

Echoed throughout our Torah over and over again this one word represents the core of the individual human soul responding to God- Hineni here I am, with all my faults and hurts- Hineni here I am, willing to be open, to listen, able to be present. It is a word that the major biblical players are only able to state after a process of self-discovery, acknowledging where they have been and how they have lived before they can respond to God.

In the Akaidah, which we read yesterday morning, Abraham answers with the call, Hineni at least three different times. To God, when asked to offer for sacrifice “et bincha yachidcha asher ahavtah”, his son, the only son whom he loves. To Isaac on the voyage to Mt. Moriah who cries “Avi, Avi”, my father, my father, knowingly questioning who will serve as the sacrifice. And finally to the angel of God- a reflection of Abraham himself, who is unable to pierce the flesh of his beloved son, but who sacrifices him just the same.

This process of response-ability for Abraham aveinu was extensive and demanding, which began with the directive from God lech lecha- go towards yourself. Like Abraham, Antoine Fisher, needed to move beyond the comfort of established behaviors, even if they were harmful, in order to discover who he could be. He needed to shuv- return to himself, before he could even utter aloud Hineni and understand the nuances of his character.

During the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are commanded to embark upon this process of teshuvah- a return to self, to others and to the Divine. The process of return cannot be accomplished by mere will; it requires work and occasional anguish, but ultimately results in a more enriched life. It allows us to examine our spiritual and moral whereabouts, measuring the distance we have traveled and the distances we have yet to go.

This seems like an overwhelming task to begin and complete in just ten days. Perhaps, that’s why traditional Judaism suggests a much longer period for reflective turning. We are expected to engage in teshuvah from the 30 days of the month of Elul, through Yom Kippur-40 days all together. We are not commanded to finish the process before Yom Kippur, just to initiate it, so that on the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur, we can stand before God and state Hineni in its fullest meaning.

The prospect of Teshuvah may seem too daunting for us to even contemplate. If it takes a long time, if it involves effort and causes emotional stress, then

why would we want to begin in the first place? We live in a world where we are able to get whatever we want, whenever we want it. Fast food, overnight delivery, online shopping at all hours. But we all know that the greater things in life require time, effort and attention: a strong marriage, raising moral and ethical children, professional success, and religious connection. Commitment leads to greater fulfillment. Don't we deserve for ourselves, some of the consideration that we give to so many other things in our lives? Don't we merit time, effort and attention to make ourselves stronger people? When we work on our own souls, everyone and everything around us, benefits.

There are four mental exercises that can help us to facilitate a deeper understanding of self.

One: strip down to the bare wood and hold a spiritual garage sale. Two: look in a true to life mirror. Three: wrestle with angels and fight the shadows, and, four: accept our flaws. All four steps are metaphors for realizing self-potential and helping us to see that we are worthy by merit of being created in the Divine image.

Step One: Strip Down to the bare wood and hold a spiritual garage sale.

Although I am not handy, I have learned that the first thing to do when restoring old chairs is to strip away the layers of paint and shellac to the pure, bare center. This is done, for two reasons: first to reveal the clarity of the original wood, second: to see what the chair has the potential to become. With a great deal of scrubbing, years of dust and dirt dissolve, leaving behind the solid, simple, original object underneath.

We, too, like old chairs, need stripping every now and again to look at the illusions we have built and see how we have moved from our original center. We need to scrape off the residue of anger and cynicism, of pain and disconnect, slowly tearing down the protective layers which keep people from seeing our core.

Stripping is a difficult process. It takes work and, sometimes sweat to dig down to the purest form of self. Occasionally, we discover that the person beneath the varnish is not who we thought it would be- too spindly, too weak, misshapen, cowardly, unable to offer support. But if we don't engage in the process, we don't know what our potential may be and we remain stuck as we are, posing as someone else- covered with ugly, chipping paint, overstuffed, under appreciated for our true beauty.

Rabbi Arthur Green tells a story about living in Berkeley, California in the early 90's. Around the corner from the family home was a new age bookstore, decorated with a huge sign in an inverted pyramid form. The top line read, in large block letters: **scientology doesn't work**. Beneath that in smaller letters, **integral yoga doesn't work**. Then again in smaller letters, **Christianity doesn't work**. After going through six or seven other would-be spiritual paths the sign concluded in large letters: **You Work and if you work towards a spiritual path that works too**.

Because we are human beings who claim freedom for ourselves, we are responsible for our actions. We have control over who we are and what we choose to do. And part of that freedom entails examining our life and our choices.

Year after year, we hold on to a great deal of spiritual refuge. And yet, before we can make room for growth, we need to admit that there are things from our past we need to release. Each and every one of us should hold a metaphorical garage sale. Price old hopes and fears. Determine what to hold on to and what to discard. What are the beliefs, prejudices, and behaviors that we no longer want or need? Which voices can we leave behind? How have we hurt others, how have others hurt us? All of these unhealthy reminders of the past clutter our soul and take the space for future growth. We don't need them! Price them, and put them on a pile to discard. Release everything that no longer

serves a purpose—all the guilt, fear, feelings of pain. The past is not binding, it does not own us. We own it. And therefore we can determine what to hold on to and what to let go. Through pricing and releasing old ideas of who we need to be, we are left with what is true to ourselves.

We see that the axiom holds true: what is one's treasure is someone else's junk, always holds true.

Step 2: Looking in a true-to-life mirror.

After we have stripped away the protective layers and freed ourselves from emotional baggage, we have the ability to see ourselves as we truly are; face our disappointments and imperfections so that we can create of ourselves a work of art. We are human beings and therefore flawed to the core. But we have the potential to transform our flaws into something acceptable to ourselves. Rabbi Larry Kushner explains, "The entire process of self-discovery is a paradox. What we imagine we must do in order to change ourselves is often the very force that keeps us the way we are. How else can we explain decades of foiled plans for growth and broken resolutions? Consumed by an apparent passion to be other than who we are, we try to be whom we are not, painting on layers of protective varnish. The goal of therapy is self-discovery, the discovery not of another self but of one's true self."

Beneath all the layers of wanting to be different is who we really are. We can accept the face in the mirror or we can pretend to be who we are not. Paul Tillich in *The Courage to Be* determines that "the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself in spite of being unacceptable."

Six-year old Sara was dressed for Purim. She wore a long, flowing blue Cinderella gown with lighter blue ruffles on the bodice and sleeves, blue sequined heels and elbow length white gloves. Sara had a tiara on her head, and beads piled around a young face highlighted with a great deal of hot pink blush, blue eye shadow and smeared red lipstick. She looked charming dancing

around the sanctuary as she imagined a princess would and so I stopped her. "Sara" I asked, "Are you Queen Esther?" Nope, she replied. "Are you Vashti?" Nope. Puzzled, as I knew there were not many other women in the Purim story, I questioned, "Who are you supposed to be?" "Oh", she responded, in a much more grown-up voice than I had ever heard her use before, "Rabbi, I am Sara wearing my mother's make-up and my Halloween costume -don't you recognize me?"

Step 3: Wrestle with angels and fight the shadows

When we have sloughed off the pieces of ourselves that we no longer want or need, we are left with the core of self, becoming aware that what we fear most is inside of us, not outside, and we begin to fight the shadows. Barry Glassner explains in his bestselling book, The Culture of Fear that Americans are afraid of the wrong things. We fear crime, killer teenagers, mutant microbes, terrorists, plane crashes, road rage- somewhat irrational external factors, rather than fearing the people we have become. All heroes are called upon to slaughter the fire-breathing dragon. All apprentices must confront the monster before becoming initiated. It is Moses, our Moses, killing the taskmaster. It is something that takes place in each of us. And it unfortunately takes a very long time because we insist upon seeing the demons as outside of us rather than inside. Psychologist Jon Kabat-Zin interprets the old fairy tales as ancient maps fitted with kings and queens, princes and princesses, dwarfs and witches who are aspects of our own psyche, strands of our own being groping towards fulfillment. We house the ogre and the witch. They must be faced and honored as parts of who we are. We condemn those around us who project the rays of our own shadow, afraid of what we truly feel. As long as we fight the image of the taskmaster tooth and nail, as long as we refuse to wrestle with the shadows inside of our souls we will be unable to say Hineni, here I am.

For the first two weeks of last year's seventh grade religious school, my student Ross disagreed with everything that his peers said in class. There was one student in particular, who Ross took great pride in tormenting. Apparently the two were family friends outside of the classroom, but within the class, Ross was always putting Eddie and his ideas down. It became very obvious that each time Eddie would answer a question, usually with brilliance and great maturity, Ross would find fault with it and attempt to humiliate him. During a private conference, I asked Ross why he felt the need to continually challenge Eddie. After several minutes of "I don't know" and "I hate going to Hebrew school but my parents make me," Ross said, "I know the answers too but I can't say them as well as Eddie can."

The shadows, which we struggle against, are not outside of our being; they are a part of our being.

Jacob, son of Isaac, sought to win the divine blessing but his methods were flawed. He cheated his brother, Esau, out of the birthright, and then fled from home to save his life. When mid-life came, Jacob was successful by definition: he had made a fortune, sired many children, supported four wives and numerous servants, but he longed for the one thing he ran from as a child: reconciliation with his brother. He set out for his childhood home, willing to do what he could to rectify his past actions. And one night, alone by the river Jabbock, sleep eluded Jacob and he was met by an agent of God who engaged him in a life or death struggle. All night, Jacob wrestled with the being and when morning came, Jacob, although wounded through the struggle, was given a new name and a new identity. He became Israel-one who has wrestled and survived.

This is our purpose, during the Yamim Noraim, to engage in the struggle for our soul. To discover true identity under layers of protective covering, built up over time, to get rid of what we don't want and to wrestle with who and what we are. Finally, able to respond, Hineni, here I am, as I am.

Wrestling with the angel is not an easy task. And yet this is what leads us to a connection with the core of our being- to the purity at the center. Without entering the struggle, we don't give ourselves the opportunity to return and respond.

There are people who can help us with these challenges, whether they are parents, Rabbis, children, spouses, friends or paid professionals.

Somewhere along the way we realize that it's OK to turn to those we trust and ask for help.

Step 4: Accept our flaws

The final stage of teshuvah is accepting who we are and realizing that our flaws make us unique. Our test in life is not to live like other people, but to become more like ourselves. Antoine Fisher recognized this when he spoke aloud the words of the frightened child inside the man. Abraham recognized this when he cried out to God. We have one life and one opportunity to be who we are. The great Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov taught, "compare yourself not with anyone else, lest you spoil God's curriculum" Life is not about products- it's about process. Our souls are not the cold perfection of diamond but the tumultuous organic stuff of creation. Struggle, repent, forgive, take risks, succeed, fail, look in the mirror, turn away from the mirror, mourn who we have become, make our entire life a work of art. Weave the uncertainties of life, the shadows the flaws, the imperfections into the quilt of being. And notice that the design is more beautiful than ever before, because it is real.

There is a Jewish parable, which illustrates perfectly the beauty of flaws. Once upon a time there lived a king who ruled a small province. The king owned great, perfect diamond that had been in his family for many generations. He kept it on display for all to see and admire. Then one day a soldier came to the king with the news that although no one had touched the diamond it was

cracked. The king ran to see and sure enough there was a large crack running down the center. Immediately he summoned all the jewelers of the land to examine the diamond. They all returned it, shaking their heads that there was nothing they could do. The diamond was useless and the king was crushed. He felt as if he had lost everything. And then out of nowhere came an old man who asked to see the diamond. He took one look at it and told the king, I can fix it; in fact I can make it better than it was before. The king gave the diamond to the old man to make the repairs. At the end of a week the old man returned with the stone in his hand and gave it to the king. The king could not believe his eyes. It was utterly magnificent. The old man had used the crack to carve an exquisite, full-blown rose. The king offered the old man half of his kingdom, but the old man replied. I did nothing. I took something that was a bit cracked and created from it a work of beauty.

This is our mission, during the course of the next ten days. To take something that is a bit cracked, a bit flawed, and create from it a work of beauty. The process is not achieved in one simple moment of ease. It takes time to strip ourselves down to the vulnerable layer, to look in the mirror, to get rid of what we don't want and wrestle with who we are. Spiritual growth is not about learning to negotiate from the universe; it is about learning to negotiate with what is within. It is the return which leads to the statement Hineni- here I am as I am. It is saying to both God and the world, I have fears, I fail, I am arrogant, I am greedy, I am guilty, I am confused, but I am more than worthy.