

Yom Kippur Sermon 5779/2018

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

Sisyphus and Mishkan

I.

Yitkhazek v'yashuv livnot et atzmo

Yitkhazek - Let a person find the means to strengthen him- or herself

V'yashuv - So that he or she might "return", i.e., do *teshuvah* of body or mind

Livnot et atzmo - So as to build himself, herself, anew

Yitkhazek v'yashuv livnot et atzmo. "Let each of us find the inner strength to do the work of return, so as to build and rebuild ourselves anew."

It's not so much a mantra as it is a motto. It's a statement of personal commitment. You might say this to yourself as you steel yourself after a particularly humiliating failure, or after surviving a disappointing encounter or a hurtful conversation, or the demise of a cherished relationship. Or upon reaching a milestone in your life and realizing that you have fallen short of your expectations for growth, or achievement, or happiness of spirit. Or upon coming to grips with mental or physical illness, either your own or a loved one's.

At that moment you feel as if the superstructure of your life has come crashing down, or at least is in serious need of repair. "Give me strength," you

pray, “to find a way out, or up, or forward” - all variations of *teshuvah* - “so that I might rebuild this broken tabernacle of myself.”

Yitchazek v'yashuv. The quote is from the modern commentary known as *Netivot Shalom*, by Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, who died in Israel in the year 2000. Benjie and I are indebted to Rabbi Jonathan Slater for introducing us to this text at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality retreats. *Netivot Shalom* is, ironically, a Litvak when it comes to adherence to rational logic, and a Hassid when it comes to finding a spiritual response to the great hard questions of our lives.

This quote comes from his commentary on *Par'shat Shemini* in Leviticus, only a few columns ahead of our Yom Kippur Torah reading tomorrow from *Akharey Mot*, where Aaron the High Priest is responsible for administering the sacrifice that will enable all of Israel to repent and rebuild themselves spiritually, emotionally, ethically, and morally for the year ahead. It is the famous ritual of the two goats.

As you know, Aaron conducts the Yom Kippur goat rite from the Mishkan, which is the desert tabernacle or tent of meeting constructed by, kept up by, and transported by the People of Israel, B'nai Yisrael. They - the *hoi poloi* - are responsible for putting the Mishkan up and taking it down as they move from place to place on their forty-year journey from Sinai to Canaan.

We might have thought that the Mishkan was only taken down every several months to several years when the mysterious cloud began to move, signaling that it was time for the Israelites to wend their way to the next oasis. But the Rabbis tell a different story.

From at least one Rabbinic point of view, the Mishkan was in fact erected and dismantled three times each day. For those who hold that this practice prevailed on Shabbat as well, it means that the Israelites took down and re-erected the Mishkan twenty-one times a week.

It doesn't require a leap of thought to realize that since there's absolutely no evidence of this in the Torah itself, it must mean that the Rabbis were using this idea of a thrice daily erecting and dismantling routine to prefigure the core of *Rabbinic* Jewish worship, which is the three daily services (*shakharit*, *minkhah*, and *ma'ariv*). The Rabbis are speaking to post-Temple Jews who need encouragement to keep seeking that "connection" to the sacred that they imagine was ever-present in the days of a Mishkan, and a Kohen dressed in white, and goats, and a ram, and a shofar, and something like the closeness of God's *shekhinah* presence.

Nonetheless, it boggles the mind that these ancient migrants might have sealed their coherence as a community by performing a complex, backbreaking, mind-numbing routine task again and again and again.

What would have given the desert Israelites purpose as they erected and re-erected the Mishkan? The answer is found in the verse in Leviticus (in *Sh'mini*) commanding the action in the first place: *vayomer moshe, zeh hadavar asher tziva ado-nai ta'asu, vayira aleichem k'vod ado-nai*; "Moses said, this is the thing that God has commanded you: 'do it', and the mystical glory of God will appear to you."

That is to say, there would be no hesitation on the part of the masses to keep doing this task if the payoff were the continuous, overarching feeling of divine protection, closeness, and well-being. The reasonable hope that things would be okay. After all, who wouldn't want that? Not only then, but now?

Perhaps that payoff was enough to help the Israelites overcome the inevitable feeling of frustration as they put the darn thing together for the second and third time in one day; or as they ran to hold up a side or repair a rip or catch a beam that had caused the whole contraption to come tumbling down. The answer was the payoff: they could connect the Mishkan to ultimate meaning, to

purposeful context. To what the Rabbis called the presence of the “Shekhinah” in the camp.

Contrast this with the familiar myth of Sisyphus. Poor Sisyphus is condemned to pushing the rock up the mountain every day from dawn to dusk, only to see the rock roll right back to where he started. Why does Sisyphus go back and do the same task again and again, day after day? Because he is condemned to do it. He has no choice. And while he is pushing it up the incline? What hope does he have that his efforts will lead to some sort of realization or vision? None whatsoever.

Many of us analogize our own lives, or at least the lives of many billions of our fellow human beings, to the curse of Sisyphus. What if instead we could see our frustrating struggles and setbacks not as pushing a boulder up a hill, but as rebuilding - re-erecting - the Mishkan of our own lives? What if we could use each act of repair as a way of making and re-making meaning; remaking connections with our life’s purpose; re-connecting to the mysterious source of all life that irradiates the world, and that identifies itself in each precious relationship we cultivate, that we let go to seed, and then re-cultivate anew?

Here is the Netivot Shalom, translation courtesy of Rabbi Slater, who not only translates this passage but brings it home for us:

“[The idea of taking down and putting up the Mishkan three times a day] is all related to spiritual practice (*avodah*), which is the way of *teshuvah*. We put so much energy into building our own inner Mishkan, so that the Shekhinah might dwell in us - but then, after all this effort we make a mistake and the whole thing comes apart.

“When that happens, our job is to turn around, take heart and set out to rebuild our spiritual home. Even if it comes apart again, we must build it once again. *Zeh hadavar asher tziva h' ta'asu* - “This is what God has commanded you to do” [in order] to attain...the quality of *teshuvah*: we must do as God has commanded on [each of the] seven days of dedication [of the Mishkan - i.e., each and every day of our lives]. Whenever we might fall, or our spiritual world collapses around us - which is like the dismantling of the Mishkan - we must raise it up anew.

“Even if we have done *teshuvah* over and over, changing and failing, we must not allow our spirits to fall and become despondent. Rather, *Yitkhazek v'yashuv livnot et atzmo* - we must take heart and set out to build *ourselves* once again. In this manner, *vayira k'vod h' aleichem* - “the Presence of the Eternal will appear to you,” i.e., you will merit having the Shekhinah dwell in you.”

II.

At this point I can imagine some of us saying that we would be just as happy not to have some sort of dybbuk like “the Shekhinah” living inside us. We’re good with self-repair, with overcoming our frustration and despair, with renewing our relationship to our world and to our own better self. But please skip the heavy-duty spiritual stuff.

I feel your pain. I get your point. I have come to realize that graphic spiritual language is a barrier for many of our Jews. It’s a barrier to *teshuvah*, for sure, but also to wholehearted participation in davening and pretty much every other part of Jewish ritual life.

I am tempted to secularize that language for you, to turn it into non-threatening psychotherapeutic terminology. To science. But that would remove the poetry. If only I could convince you to hear this language not as psycho-technical, but also not as hokus pokus, and not as literal. Real and true, but not literal. If only I could get you to try letting this language in - as poetry. As prayer. As aspiration.

When a rabbi or a teacher talks about bringing the *shekhinah* into the Mishkan of our own being, the teacher is inviting us to see ourselves not as divided creatures, with a soul over here and a body over there and a mind up here

and a libidinal urge down here, but rather as a unique creature with a purpose and a provenance issued from the original source of all life.

The teacher is inviting us to unify the disparate parts of ourselves into the whole person we are meant to be. When the teacher says “let the Shekhinah dwell in you,” he or she is inviting you to not to submit passively to some spiritual ruler from on high or from a distant planet, but to actively choose to be your full self in all its glory and its failure. He or she is inviting you to accept yourself as basically good, and to find the way out of your despair and inward toward wholeness.

That is *teshuvah*. And the practice of working toward *teshuvah* is *avodah*, the “hard labor” of getting to the point where we value our lives ultimately, and where we see the point of rebuilding ourselves to re-enter the fray of the world. The social world, the professional world, the political world, the world “out there.” That is what so-called spiritual people mean when they talk about “the image of God” in every individual. That is what they mean by “restoring the soul,” *meshivat nafesh*.

III.

We will spend the next twenty-plus hours together. We will try to accomplish something we cannot do alone, but which, paradoxically, each of us

must ultimately do for ourselves. That task is the re-erecting of the fallen Mishkan of our individual lives. Whether we “re-direct the Shekhinah into the core of our consciousness” is our own business. But whether we get that Mishkan up and running again is everybody’s business. Everybody here counts on everybody else to make this work.

From the day-to-day support we give each other when someone has a medical challenge, or someone has a death in the family, or someone needs a loving ear as they go through a mental health crisis, or someone needs a pass until they can get their finances together or find new employment, or when their child has a breakdown over his bar mitzvah preparation or something much worse, or when we simply have no one to talk to or befriend;

In all these matters, we rely on someone else to have their Mishkah up and running. And someone else relies on us to do the very same thing. That is the meaning of community. And community is made up of individuals working together, trying to believe in enough of the same thing so that they can get beyond what they precisely believe and get on to the work of taking care of one another, as well as taking care of the much less fortunate folk just beyond their own borders.

When that happens - and it both happens and *un*-happens countless times a day - then we say that we are doing *avodah*; that we are doing *teshuvah*; that we are translating the rich mythic imagery of Yom Kippur into (you guessed it) a spiritual practice.

Yitkhazek v'yashuv livnot et atzmo. Nitkhazek v'nashuv livnot et atzmeinu

Let us strengthen ourselves, so as to turn ourselves to the task of rebuilding ourselves, and in so doing, rebuild one another and our fallen Mishkan, our fallen world that yearns to be put upright again.