

Teshuvah as our Jewish Vibranium: Returning, Presence and Existing out of Time

By Avi Brooks for Yom Kippur 2018 at the Scottish Rite Memorial Temple on
Wednesday September 19, 2018

Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you today. I hold it as a sacred trust and truth.

I have to confess: I do not like the word “sin”. It is so judgemental (be sure to shrug) and I like the word “khet” (mistake) instead. I prefer understanding T’shuvah as returning to the mark and restoring our alignment with the Shekhina, the spiritual Presence among us. For me the Day of Atonement is a Day of restoration and re-alignment with that Presence. And it serves as a portal of renewal to transform cries of regret and despair into plans for action and the accompanying joy that action can bring as we carry out transformative deeds in the world.

Justin Vernon, the lead singer for Bon Iver teamed up with a dance company based in Minneapolis called Tu Dance to create a musical dance collaboration and piece called *Come Through*. His lyrics and the astounding choreography that accompanies the song are haunting in their reach:

“All Along I can hear it...and the concrete is very slow...I can hear, I can hear, I can hear crying.” Now he definitely sings it better than I can say it.

The song when I heard it spoke to me of this particular moment of our nation’s cruelty, of hearing the cries of those being deported, torn from their families and of those folks of color facing police brutality and in the LGBTQ community suffering from bullying and murder. How do we as individuals and as a community bear witness to this? How do we address these transgressions and atone for them? How do we transform our individual and collective deeds to address not only our own regrets but to get back to and find our best communal selves?

At the same time, we have to remind ourselves to encounter the challenge of social justice work without getting sucked into the muck of exhaustion. Our best selves are not necessarily the ones that have burnt out either.

Celebrating social justice is a moment of returning to our true selves, as a moment for gathering with community, and playing together as a path to make social activism a call for creative play to surprise and rework authoritarian ways of being into democratic transformative ones. This is similar to a Game Jam, an event in which game developers and ordinary people who just like games from designers, artists, social scientists from amateur to professional get together, develop a game and demonstrate it quickly.

We have a chance for creating new spaces for possibilities.

This day offers a moment for communal cooperative and spiritual cleansing and an opening for personal and collective renewal. We can shed our less robust selves and paradigms and practices that do not work well for a majority of us to create a post capitalist, and post-corporate world not driven exclusively by profit. Even to the point that we have the opportunity to redefine what profit and wealth means that includes real quality of life considerations such as the right to universal healthcare, a free education and to have dignity, happiness and communal support.

Avriham Kook who lived from 1865 to 1935 has some incredible insight about Teshuvah. In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedirim 39b, a midrash notes Teshuvah as among one of the seven things that existed before creation. Because of this act, Kook comments that Teshuvah stands outside of and exists outside of time.

Kook noticed how our deeds are linked in a chain and “since nothing can be entirely detached, a person’s desire has the ability to impress a unique identity even upon [one’s] past deeds.” Since Teshuvah is before, present and ahead in all time, its presence “...extends the power of a person’s creativity in its relationship to deeds and existence until that spiritual creativity will come to grasp even the past within its domain.” That is, you can reach back and repair a past deed!

In the latest neuroscience research, MRI scans show that we actually tend to see more into any scene we visually encounter than is actually present. We have this capacity to see and imagine a future that might occur. The same regions in our brains light up for past and future events! This is Teshuvah in action!

In a framework for neuropolitics, to reimagine culture, power and our political subjectivity and in the light of our increasing knowledge about the human brain and extended mind, experiential futurists, Stuart Candy, Jake Dunagan and Jason Tester, call for the need “to create alternative memories of the future” and I think Teshuvah provides this form of cognitive prosthetic, a capacity for future memories. And therefore the capacity to imagine new personal and social structures that fit our bodies and communal minds better.

Teshuvah has the power to change past deeds not in a linear sense but unilaterally restoring or perhaps rescuing a sprouting seed within a rotten fruit or the fog of Tuma’ot, pollution of the spirit. Game jams, as a metaphor, can rework our memories, creating new scenes and new futures.

I love the act of sending Azazel, the ritual goat, into the wilderness by the priest carrying the weight of ways of being that no longer work for us and as a symbolic act for the shedding of past mistakes as we grow new rituals, and rediscover our more robust and healthier selves.

Teshuvah, to me is the spiritual vibrarium displayed in the ritual of speaking with the ancestors for wisdom and guidance from the film *The Black Panther*. Existing

outside of time, it has a Presence we can tap into as our own personal and communal vibranium to return to our best selves and transform past deeds into new openings as windows into next stages of being what we aspire to become. We can see more into that scene, imagine and grow new limbs, our memories of alternative futures.

One of my favorite quotes from a Siddur I think captures this wonder of Teshuvah (p. 257): "For the expanding grandeur of the [Universe], worlds known and unknown, galaxies upon galaxies, filling us with awe and challenging our imaginations". In hitting the mark and shedding unworkable paths of being, we challenge our imagination to create and try on more robust, compassionate ways of being.

I would like to offer another interpretation of a passage from Leviticus 16:30, where the original passage proclaims "...before the presence of Hashem, you will become pure". Instead, why not say, "Before the Presence of Shehkina, you will imagine more!"

I Can Hear Crying

Bon Iver

Produced by Justin Vernon

[Verse]

All along I can hear it
I'm over the dash
And I'm having a bad toke
And the concrete's very slow
All along the sideline's bigger
I go for the cast
I fall off a bass boat
And the concrete's very slow
And the concrete's very slow
All along I can hear it

[Chorus]

I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying

[Verse]

All along I can hear it
I'm over the dash
I'm having a bad, bad toke
And the concrete's very slow

All along the sideline's bigger
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I fall off a bass boat
And the concrete's very slow
And the concrete's very slow
All along I can hear it

[Chorus]

I can hear, I can hear

I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying
I can hear cry
I can hear, I can hear
I can hear, I can hear crying

[Outro]

I can hear cry