

MORAL CONUNDRUM AHEAD

(Eizehu Gibbor?)

Rosh Hashanah 5773

Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of her uncle, a physician, who received a medal for heroic action in World War II. As a medic, he was embedded with troops who found themselves under enemy fire. Within minutes, the ridge that they occupied was covered with wounded soldiers, and the fighting persisted for 12 hours. Remen's uncle, realizing the men would die if he did not treat them in the midst of battle, strapped his medical supplies to his back and crawled on his belly to one man after the next. He placed tourniquets to stem the blood flow and transcribed notes to loved ones, all under enemy fire. He was honored for saving dozens of lives and brought comfort to many more in their final moments.

Remen was 7 years old when her uncle returned home, and told him how proud she was of him – a war hero - for never being afraid of anything. He told her that, on the contrary, he had never been more terrified in all his life. “But why did they give you a medal then?” she asked. He explained, “Being brave does not mean being unafraid. It often means being afraid and doing it anyway” (Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 50).

The question of courage and cowardice reemerges in the public consciousness whenever we are confronted by extraordinary and public displays of either:

Courage: Like the men and women who took to the streets after their children were imprisoned by Assad's regime in Feb 2011 in Daraa, Syria. The students had been arrested for writing anti-government graffiti on the walls of their school, and when their parents heard that they were being tortured, they staged a sit in, chanting '*All that we want is our children.*' Four protesters were shot on the spot – which led hundreds more to take to the street the next day. Which led thousands more to go out and protest, resolute, the following day. Which led to a withering crack-down. Which led to an all-out siege of the town, and ultimately to a ferocious civil war that has now killed 21,000 people in 18 months and displaced well over a million. But it all started when a few parents found the courage to fight for their kids.

Courage: Like the women of Togo, in West Africa, who – inspired by the women of Liberia (who you'll be hearing more about on Yom Kippur) recently staged a sex strike - demanding that the president resign and end his family's 40 year rule.

Courage: Like the two football players who shattered the perception of an intensely and universally homophobic culture in the NFL by speaking out publicly in favor of same-sex marriage, who are now at the forefront of what is being called a “seismic shift... [in the country] in support of equality and fairness” (NYT 9/9/12).

Or the 19 year old kid who turned back *into* the Aurora theater from the exit door, in order to save a young mother and her two children.

And COWARDICE: When something like the scandal at Penn State occurs, when we see beloved coaches and respected university officials scrambling to cover up the abuse of children. And the most haunting, disturbing image of year: a grown man, a former football player, quietly backing out of the locker room rather than confront the attacker and save a 10 year old child.

Over the past several decades, studies have been done in earnest to understand precisely why it is that some people act, while others stand by silently. In these studies, emergency situations are staged to note the likelihood of decent people intervening. These studies have consistently produced one effect: as much as we'd like to believe otherwise, individuals will rarely attempt to intervene to stop violence and protect victims when they, themselves, are not directly targeted. Given the chance to be a hero, we will almost all fail, almost all the time. And that outcome is multiplied when there are multiple bystanders – the more people watching, stunningly, the less likely it is that anyone will do anything about it. This social-psychological phenomenon has come to be called the Bystander Effect.

There are two basic reasons why good people don't get involved. First, most people don't trust themselves – they tend to look to others to determine if a reaction is necessary or appropriate, rather than act on their own instinct. If nobody else is doing anything, they don't feel they ought to either. Second, everyone assumes that it's not their problem. Someone else can get involved; I'm late to a meeting.

Disturbing as it is, this effect is replicated not only in sanitized social science experiments, but also on street:

Consider what happened in Jerusalem last month:

On a hot summer night a group of Israeli teenagers - 13-19 years old – attacked four Palestinian teens from East Jerusalem who had the misfortune of walking through the *kikar tzion*, in the center of town, at that moment. The group caught 17 yr old Jamal Julani, who was thrown to the ground and pummeled, then left for dead. To Israel's credit, the attack was immediately condemned by Israeli police, government and communal leaders as a "terror attack," an "attempted lynching" and a "hate crime." Some members of the government - perhaps realizing that things had devolved to such a point that without dramatic intervention democracy and civil society in Israel might be irretrievably lost - spoke forcefully of the need for accountability and a kind of national *heshbon hanefesh* – accounting - over the past month. How could it be that our children are so easily driven to violence? And, equally important, how could it be that more than one hundred bystanders stood on the side of the street and watched, but not one intervened?

As much as we don't want to believe that it's true, statistically and historically speaking, even when the stakes are highest, we'd likely do absolutely nothing too.

And yet it turns out that there are two determinants that change the otherwise reliable and consistent effects of the bystander hypothesis:

The first is the witnesses identifying with the victim. If you feel a real sense of kinship – either through gender, religion, race, nationality, the odds are you will find a way to intervene to save or protect a victim, even at great personal risk. In other words, the sad reality is that if those four Palestinians had been four Jewish kids, you can bet that a good number of the Jewish bystanders would have found a way to intervene – even in a crowd, even with the very real threat of harm. What will it take for us to see one another, especially in times of need, not as Jew/ Muslim/ Christian, not as American/ foreigner, Democrat/ Republican or even Palestinian/ Israeli, but as human being? The more pervasive the feelings of isolation and disconnection between people and communities, the less likely we are to fight for one another when it matters most.

There is another factor that reliably changes the outcome of the bystander effect: if a person is warned before walking into a simulated crisis: you are about to be thrust into a moral dilemma and you will be judged based on how you respond. Essentially, if someone waves a flag in front of your face saying *Moral Conundrum Ahead*, you are likely to find your moral compass, and fast.

Today we read the story of Abraham, who is called by Sarah to exile his son, Ishmael and Hagar, his second wife. And tomorrow we read of the binding of Isaac – *Akeidat Yitzhak* – two days of Rosh Hashanah, two Torah readings dealing with moments in which Abraham is tested by God. Our tradition teaches that these were the last, and perhaps the most awful, of the 10 trials Abraham was forced to undergo, all by the hand of God – *asara nisyonot nitnasa Avraham avinu...* (Pirkei Avot 5:4).

God puts Abraham to the test *10 times*. From being called to leave behind everything he knows to start his life in a foreign place, to needing to leave Canaan upon arrival because of famine, to witnessing his beloved wife suffer abduction by two different men, to learning how to fight and how to make peace, to circumcising his sons and himself, to sending away one son and nearly killing another, Abraham is put to the test again and again.

The trials are unrelenting. I have always wondered if they are fair. Why test and test and test? Is that what love is?

Some of you I'm sure read the crazy story recently of a 30 year old Russian mogul who faked his own death by staging a car crash (replete with stunt drivers, screenwriters and makeup artists) in order to see how his fiancée would respond to the sight of him sprawled across the ground and covered in blood, and to make his marriage proposal even more romantic (NPR 9.8.12).

Rabbi Meir had a similar idea in the Talmud when he decided to test his wife Bruria's love for him by trying to tempt her with seduction from a younger, presumably more handsome student of Torah. Bruria was known to be a great scholar and woman of profound integrity, but she ultimately could not help but succumb to the pressures of her suitor (AZ 18b Rashi).

I tend to think of tests of faith and love as ill-conceived and ill-fated; a recipe for relational disaster. All the more so, then: what kind of a God needs to test like that? But in light of the events of this past year, I understand - the kind of God who wants us to know that *all of life is a test*. That the way we respond to life's most trying moments – great and small - actually matters. Moral conundrum ahead – writ large.

Me'or Einayim, the 16th century Italian scholar, teaches: This is the lesson of all of the trials: Just as Abraham our father had ten trials, so too every single person is tried, over the course of his life, with ten trials. The whole of our lives is a series of trials... (*Parashat Va-eira*).

Each of us faces ten trials in the course of our lifetime. The problem is that we can't tell at any given moment if the dilemma that stands before us is one of the essential tests of our lives.

So we're compelled to assume that any moment could be *the* moment. That the way we respond, or don't respond, could come to define us.

The theory: if you know you're always being tested, if you walk through life thinking 'maybe this is one of the ones that will really matter' – you'll actually start to live differently.

In Plato's Republic, Glaucon asks Socrates to imagine that a just and righteous man finds the Ring of Gyges– the legendary golden band that gives a person the ability to become invisible at will. Will he remain just, or will he steal, kill, and sleep with whomever he'd like – making himself "in all respects like a god among men"? (Plato's Republic, 360b-d). There is no question, he argues, that without the threat of discovery or recourse, there is not a person in the world who would not pursue his basest appetites. Even the most just, he argues, are good only when they believe people are watching. In other words, if we don't *have* to do the right thing, we won't. Maybe we really are only good when others are watching.

Glaucon may have been right about human nature. So rather than deny or try to fight nature, Torah instead tries to train us to work on the assumption that someone is *always* watching.

Today – we dive into the period of very intensive reflection that leads us to Yom Kippur. We start today by remembering - celebrating when we got it right, and acknowledging when we didn't.

That's why I asked us to bring to mind our own moments of courage and cowardice. Moments when we passed the test and moments when we failed. Moments when we buried our head in a book and pretended we couldn't hear our friend's cries as he was bullied, and moments when we punched a kid in the face to stop him from bullying a friend. Moments when we risked our jobs and stood up to the boss because we could no longer abide by the abuse and dishonesty, and moments when we quietly acquiesced; afraid we'd be targeted and fired.

Eizehu gibbor? Ben Zoma asked. Who is a hero? *Hakovesh et yitzro* – one who is able to overcome his inclination.

But this is not just the inclination to do evil – the inclination to be ruled by our greed and hunger and desire, our inclination to indulge in undeserved profit, cut corners, cheat the system, cheat our partners. *Hakovesh et yitzro* is also about overcoming the inclination to hide. To quietly turn away and slip out the door, rather than confront injustice when we see it.

In the language of Netivot Shalom, (riffing on *Me'or Eynaim*): Every person is called to some *shlihut elyona* – sent into this world for a higher purpose. Through these trials, he suggests, we are actually achieving what we were put into this world to do.

Each one of us is called to greatness. But we have no idea what our moment is.

For one of you, you very well may have fulfilled your *shlihut elyona* – your higher calling - when you called your friend, bereft after her child's death, every day for years.

For another, it may have been the moment that you picked up the phone and called 911 when your husband collapsed, saving his life.

It may be, for one of you, that the daily choice to get out of bed each morning after suffering unthinkable loss was your *shlihut elyona* – you fulfilling your higher purpose.

And it's entirely possible that finding the courage to leave an abusive husband – to save your children and yourself – was an act of *shlihut elyona* – higher calling for another.

Because we are caught between two conflicting cultural impulses – on one hand, the time-tested, quantifiable human impulse to do nothing, to hide as if helpless or to walk away when it matters most. And on the other hand, our Jewish impulse – the legacy of Abraham – to understand that every single moment is a test. That every battle and every attempt at peace is a test. Every act of submission and every act of defiance is a test. How you respond when the guy in the store miscalculates in your favor, how you respond when your professor professes bigotry – all of these are tests.

About 18 months ago, a tiny baby girl in New York named Ayelet Galena was diagnosed with a rare condition that affected her stomach and her immune system. Her parents were told that she needed a bone marrow transplant in order to live. So they created a blog for Ayelet, posting a desperate plea for a match. The blog went viral, and found 14,000 followers who were captivated by this little girl's struggle to stay alive, by her sweet smile and her innate goodness, even as her body failed her.

Thousands of people across the country entered the bone marrow registry in the space of a few weeks. Miracle of miracle, a match was found, donor cells successfully extracted and one year old Ayelet underwent the transplant. I want for us to think for a moment about the quiet act of heroism of being a bone marrow donor. It's one thing to get swabbed – we all should. But quite another to upend your life for several weeks – to undergo physical examinations, take a week's worth of injections that increase the number of blood-forming cells in your bloodstream, fly – often across the country – and go through the harvesting process. One of the members of our community was found to be a match – not to Ayelet, but to another desperately sick person, about two years ago. You probably know him, but you don't know this chapter of his life, because in characteristic humility he barely told anyone outside family. Just went through the medical preparation and took a couple of days off work to fly up to Seattle to undergo the procedure. "We have to celebrate you – what you have done is extraordinary!" I told him. "No celebration - please," he said. "I feel like I won the lottery that I get to do this."

In Ayelet's case, the transplant was successful. Ayelet's parents posted the letter that they wrote to their anonymous donor. Part of it read:

A divine set of actions somehow put you in the donor registry in the right time and right place. I don't even know you to know you are a holy, and special person...

Because of you, she is alive. She continues to live because of you. How does one thank the person who has given our daughter another chance at life?

Every good action, friend she makes, person she touches, tear she cries, merit she has in this world is in your honor...

And I can tell you, my daughter has already affected many people, and will continue to do so every day.

Ayelet lived another year, finally succumbing to her illness this past January. In his eulogy, Ayelet's grandfather – a rabbi – noted that just that week they had “received the 21st notice that yet another life saved had been saved from [donor] searches done for Ayelet. Do we know anyone else,” he asked, “who has saved 21 lives?” Now, nearly 9 months later, the number has reached 42 - 42 people identified as bone marrow matches, and 5 transplants successfully completed, because of this beautiful little girl and her fierce will to live.

Ayelet's father, Seth, said at her funeral: Many people think we are courageous or brave. But the only strength we had was realizing we could not do this alone, we needed help. We reached out, through the blog, through facebook, and it is everyone in this room's strength that kept us going. Pumping positivity into a hopeless situation.

This year, we will all face trials.

Some – but not all - will be given the opportunity to save a life, or help restore dignity to another person.

Some will have to find the strength to bury loved ones.

Some of us will have to figure out how to end a relationship that has been slowly suffocating us over the course of years.

Some will need to find a way to ask for help when they reach their limits.

Others to support friends whose hearts are heavy with pain.

So here is your warning: MORAL CONUNDRUM AHEAD.

With each choice, consider:

What if you were put in world to do this- but your fear paralyzes you?

What if this trial is the way that you will fulfill your *shlichut elyona* – your purpose in the world?

What if this decision is the one that comes to define you?

God, give us the insight and the strength to act bravely and decisively – to see in every moment, great and small, the opportunity for growth in strength and courage.

Shana tova.