

**Dvar Torah Yom Kippur 5777 2016 Shacharit
Rabbi Mike Comins**

I'd like to start with a poem by David Whyte entitled Self-Portrait (from *Fire in the Earth*).

*It doesn't interest me if there is one God
or many gods.*

*I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.*

*If you can know despair or see it in others.
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
with its harsh need*

*to change you. If you can look back
with firm eyes*

*saying this is where I stand. I want to know
if you know*

*how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward*

*the center of your longing. I want to know
if you are willing*

*to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
and the bitter*

unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have left off the last line, which I will save for the end.

Let me segue without transition to one of the major, poetic images of Yom Kippur. Traditionally, we are all dressed in white, and we don't eat or even drink. There are two interpretations in rabbinic literature as to why. The first is that to dress this way is to imitate a corpse. The traditional funeral shroud is a white kittle, a white dress, and you've probably noticed that many Jews choose to be buried in this traditional garb.

The second explanation is that we imitate the angels, all white, not needing food and water to perform our heavenly duties, we show our aspiration to be close to God, and to live like an angel, not tempted to do wrong.

The reason to image ourselves as corpses is clear. As I spoke about last night, Yom Kippur is the day that we are invited to confront our mortality.

So when Rabbi Eliezer says in Pirkei Avot, in the Sayings of the Father, when he says, do teshuva one day before you die, he means, do teshuva every day. Every day you should remember that this could be your last, that tomorrow could be your funeral, that your decisions should reflect the perspective of your entire life.

Another segue without transition. Here is a teaching story that demonstrates the theory of change that is pre-supposed in Jewish thought and later in Western philosophy.

I am walking down the street and I see a person who needs help crossing the street. But I am in a hurry, I'm late for an appointment, and I avert my eyes and keep going. Later that night, before I go to sleep, I think back on my behavior and I realize that I have behaved badly. This is not the person I think I am. This is not the way I want to be. The next day, the exact same situation presents itself and I say, aha, this time I will help, and I do. And it happens the next day and the next day—this is a teaching story—and by the end of the week, I don't have to think about it all. When I see this situation I immediately go to help. What started as a reasoned thought process is now a gut reaction, and I have changed.

The process is that I analyze my past behavior, I identify something problematic, I decide that I want to change. Then I imagine, I image the person I want to be, and then consciously shape myself into that person. It becomes habit to act right.

Another way of looking at it: I identified a part of me that I want to leave behind. A part of me was able to look at suffering and keep walking down the road. That part of me has to die, a little death, a little death of a piece of myself. And that's where Yom Kippur ritual helps. To see myself as a corpse is to remind myself that I must view every day from the perspective of a whole life, and that there are parts of me that I need to let go of, parts of me that need to die, so that I can grow and live better.

David Whyte

*I want to know...If you can know despair or see it in others.
I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day, with the ...
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This to me is the moment of Joseph in the pit.

Our ancestor, Joseph, you might recall, is such an immature and arrogant teenager that most of his brothers want to kill him. He is saved from death by Rueven, who says, let's put him in a pit rather than spill blood ourselves, and Yehuda, who then pulls him out of the pit and sells him to a passing caravan, so that he ends up a slave in Egypt, and you know the story from there, he rises to be the viceroy of Egypt.

The same assertiveness that got Joseph into trouble with his brothers, serves him well in Egypt. He has the presence and the courage to stand before Pharaoh and interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He doesn't shrink from the spotlight, he's willing to take his chances.

But something has changed. Before Egypt, Joseph never mentions God, in Egypt, every success he has he attributes to God. He is still assertive, but if he was arrogant before, now he acts from a place of humility. Before he was insensitive, and selfish. Now he knows how tenuous life is, that ultimately he cannot control his fate, that he needs chesed, he needs loving kindness and grace. Where did he learn this?

I think he learned it in the pit. Where his brothers left him, in a place of darkness, sitting in a hole that for all he knew, would be his grave. He had nothing but time to think about how he might do things differently if given the chance.

Perhaps Joseph reflected and learned exactly what he had to leave behind in that pit, what part of him had to die, if he were to live better. And that is also our task on Yom Kippur, to learn what we might leave behind, and facilitate the little deaths that we must do. This is where ritual aids us by dressing us up like corpses, and asking us in the prayers, who shall live and who shall die. We confront our own mortality, we know we cannot wait, who knows how much time is left, we must change now, so that we may live better.

The spiritual dynamic here is the motion of a push. We look backward at our past, identify something that we don't like, and we push ourselves away from it. There is another dynamic of teshuvah, where we're not looking backward, we're looking forward. This is the moment where I imagine, I image, the person I want to be. Here, I'm not feeling a push, I'm feeling a pull. I'm attracted to the image of a better self.

*I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward the center of your longing. I want to know if you are willing
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love*

When called by God, the first reaction of almost every prophet is to say, thanks but no thanks. They can't imagine being a prophet or they don't want it, and the moment of transformation comes when against their will, they are pulled out of their comfort zones and exposed to the ultimate. Just like confronting death. Only

here, instead of confronting the dark, here people are changed by confronting the light. When Isaiah was called by God, he saw the heavenly choir, the angels singing. Yom Kippur helps because, for one day, one might see oneself as an angel. Dressed in white, fasting, we can do more than think it, we might even be able to feel it.

What often holds people back from changing is not their inability to do good, but their fear to claim their own power to do good. I don't know why that's true, but it is one of the truest things that I know. We fear the unknown. So often people prefer the devil they know. We can be so afraid to be the people we know that we can be.

To that the ritual of Yom Kippur says, you can be someone different. Feel what it's like to be an angel for a day. Here is a day in which you can feel what it feels like to not need most any of the things that motivate our actions in our everyday lives. We don't need any of it, not even food and water. Today, you are not your past, you are not your parents, you are not your wound. Today, you are close to God.

I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living falling toward the center of your longing.

Falling. Not aiming or seeking or striving, but falling toward the center of your longing. Surrendering to your deepest desire.

This reminds me of Jacob. Jacob is the paradigm of transformation, Genesis explicitly tells us, because his name is changed to signify the change he undergoes when he becomes Israel.

Jacob, as you might recall, steals his brother Esau's birthright and flees his wrath by running to Mesopotamia, stays with uncle Laban and marries his daughters Leah and Rachel, and after twenty years, runs away from Laban with his family and flocks, returning to Canaan. Esau is now the leader of his own clan, and Jacob hopes his has matured and cooled down in the interim. But when he sends a messenger to announce his arrival, Esau rides out to greet him, with 400 men. With an army.

Jacob understandably fears for the worst. He frantically improvises. He splits his camp into two so that at least half might escape. He sends 7 rounds of gifts to Esau. He prays. And finally, as he senses the danger, he gets everybody up in the middle of the night and has them cross the Jabbok river, and when he is the last person left who hasn't crossed yet, he is suddenly accosted by an ish, by a man, a mysterious man and a wrestling match ensues.

The man is thought to be an angel by the midrash and most commentators, some say it's Esau, the latest scholarly opinion is that the ish is God God's self. In any event, the ish attacks Jacob, and they wrestle. The ish cannot defeat him, Jacob holds his own. And as the dawn approaches, the ish needs to leave. But before he goes, he wrenches Jacob's hip. Jacob retaliates by holding on to the ish and refusing to let the ish go until he receives a blessing from him, and the blessing is the new name

Yisrael, he who wrestles with God, because, and I'm quoting what the ish says to Jacob, ki sarita im elohim v'im anashim, vatuchal. And you wrestled with God and with people, and you prevailed.

What to make of this?

First, I have spoken about the role of analyzing the past and imagining the future in the process of self-change. There is another moment in the process, the present moment. The past and future are important for all kinds of reasons, as we've seen, but ultimately, whatever happens can only happen in the present. Jacob is not thinking about the past or the future during the wrestling match. If he does, he won't survive.

Second, Jacob's transformation is not prompted by an intellectual process, but by a bodily experience.

Compared to his brother Esau the desert hunter and warrior, Jacob was the intellectual in the family. When Esau threatened him, he ran, because he knew that if he had to fight him, he would lose. Laban also possessed superior force, so Jacob leaves by stealth. He avoids direct conflict. He gets where he gets through his brains, not his brawn. Understandably, he works with his strengths and not his weaknesses.

But now, everything has changed. Why does the ish injure Jacob in the hip? The stories in Genesis are terse. We used to joke in the yeshivah that God is the editor from hell. Every detail is there for a reason, no word is superfluous, and yet no biblical commentators ask that question, except for one, the Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, 12th century France. Why the hip? Because Jacob ran from Esau and ran from Laban. Jacob, literally, can run no more.

So Jacob is exactly in the situation that he has worked so hard to avoid. He is in a fight. A physical fight. His rational mind tells him what it knows: you are about to die. And it is there, staring death in the face, that Jacob leaves his rational mind behind. Instead, he fights, and this is where he becomes a new and different person. He doesn't study a page of Talmud or read a book by Plato. He gains no new intellectual insight. Rather, he discovers the power of his body, and he discovers his courage.

The ish's words to Jacob are generally translated, you have wrestled with God and with people, vatuchal, you have prevailed, meaning you won the wrestling match. Literally, however, vatuchal means, and you were able. Not, you won, but you are able.

Jacob changes as he discovers his own abilities, and thus his possibilities in life, that he never knew before.

To me, and I suspect for many people in this room, the modern day equivalent of Jacob's wrestling match is to go out into wilderness, to hike, backpack, kayak, ski, rock-climb.

The dangers are real in wilderness; any mistake has consequences. If you are lost in thoughts about the past or future, if you're not present and paying attention to what is happening right now, you are likely endangering yourself. Wilderness requires mindfulness and heightened awareness.

And wilderness, of course, challenges our bodies. Through that, we learn about ourselves—our patience, our courage, our longing, resolve, resilience, creativity, the list goes on. We also learn about friendship and responsibility and leadership and staying calm in dangerous situations, and also, the mental faculties are tested, intelligence, learning to anticipate problems and problem solving. In wilderness, we challenge ourselves, and we develop ourselves—physically, mentally, emotionally, ethically, spiritually.

The midrash points out something profound in Jacob's new name, Yisrael, God wrestler. As you know, the Torah doesn't have vowels. If you vocalize the letters of the Torah differently, one gets instead of yisrael, Yashar El, yashar before God. What does yashar mean? It means straight, honest. Ya'akov, Jacob in Hebrew, literally means, "He will circumvent." He will get around. Like a crab, to go forward, he walks sideways.

Jacob goes from Ya'akov, the circumventer, to Yashar El, the straight one, the honest one before God. That's the inner transformation that is so profound. No longer able to run, no longer able to circumvent, Jacob becomes honest, about who he is and how he is to act in the world. That is what Yom Kippur is meant to enable us to do, this day-long retreat of reflection and prayer, we are meant to become honest about who we are, to cut through our self-deceptions, and see ourselves as we really are, with all of our flaws, so that we might gather our courage to wrestle with God and wrestle with ourselves, and gather our resolve to change ourselves and act better in the world.

My prayer for us today is that we might enter the day as corpses, as people prepared to see part of ourselves die. Like Jacob, may we fight, and in the fight, may we find our courage. May we find our courage to answer David Whyte's challenge: *I want to know..If you can look back with firm eyes saying this is where I stand.* May we use that courage to become yashar, to look at ourselves with honesty and resolve and recognize our need for chesed, for the lovingkindness of God and people. May we understand our need to be held by this divine mystery that we can never fully comprehend, but that we can feel, the divine mystery that attracts us with light, that shows us what we might be, that challenges us to be what we might be. May we leave this Yom Kippur day as angels, flying with the heavenly host, in the company of the divine.

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*to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
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*I have heard, in that fierce embrace, even
the gods speak of God.*