

Jenny Wong Drash
Rosh Hashanah 5784
September 2023

Shana Tova and Shabbat Shalom.

Two weeks ago, I had an urge to dive into the swimming pool. I was visiting my husband Mark's parents who have one, and it looked so inviting. The only problem was it had been over 30 years since I remember diving into water. I was excited, but to be honest I was also pretty scared. What if I hurt myself? What if I flopped badly? What if I swallowed too much water? Could my body cooperate with my mind to go in head first?

As I stood on the diving board, I found myself reverting back to my childhood, drowning out that voice of self doubt, telling myself, I can do this. I tried jumping off the diving board numerous times, failing each time. It took a lot of encouragement from my husband and my 18 year old son Steven before I was able to do it. I thought back to when I encouraged my kids when they were learning how to swim, careful to push them only a little. This time, I noticed Steven was the one pushing me, but not too much. He even got out of the pool to show me how easy it was to dive in head first. At last, I was successful - and I felt a remarkable sense of relief. I felt my fear literally wash away. I felt renewed.

In our Jewish religion - and in many other religions - water is viewed as a cleansing agent. We have the mikvah for purification. In Hebrew, it is *mikveh mayim* (מִקְוֵה-מַיִם), translated as "in which water is collected". It is interesting that the Hebrew word *mikveh* is derived from the root of the Hebrew word for hope. When I emerged from the mikveh as part of my conversion process, I was indeed hopeful.

We also have the practice of tashlich where we cast bread or maybe other things, so as to not harm the environment into the water, to let go of our sins. During the high holidays through the practice of teshuva, we attempt to wipe the slate clean and return to a place of balance. We acknowledge and let go of all the ways we have harmed ourselves and our family, friends, and community. We also summon the courage to forgive ourselves and others as we commit to a new and better year.

After my dive, I thought about not just how I had overcome my fear, but also how blessed I was to have the water to dive into. I thought more about the many positive experiences I've had with water, at the beach, on hikes, and while gardening. But this was juxtaposed to what we have all seen in the news lately, with climate change supercharged hurricanes, flooding, and drought. They say water is life-- and it's true - we can't live without it but it can also cause tremendous damage. The more I thought about this, the angrier I got. I've been feeling this way a lot this year whenever I watch the news of yet another climate related disaster.

In a midrash on Ecclesiastes 7:13, God showed Adam the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Make certain that you do not ruin and destroy My world, as if you destroy it, there will be no one to mend it after you." **No one to mend it after you.**

I think this is stated pretty clearly. Mom and dad aren't going to clean up after us. It may one day be too late for our children or grandchildren to clean up after us. We are responsible. I've been angry at political leaders and fossil fuel corporations who have dismissed climate science for decades and left us in the

situation we are in. Should I be granting them forgiveness? I was also angry at myself for even little things I do that contribute to the climate crisis.

Should I be asking for forgiveness for my part in hurting our earth? What do we do before it is too late? As we've approached these high holidays, I've reflected on these feelings and the two important tasks before us:

(1) Granting forgiveness and

(2) Asking forgiveness

Granting forgiveness - I always thought that granting forgiveness was the end goal. Growing up - my childhood wasn't easy. I grew up poor and food insecure. Some of these experiences have led to painful memories of not having enough and being left out. I think this is partly why the climate crisis is hitting me so hard. Seeing people without -people who have lost homes from flooding and other climate disasters, brings me back to my childhood, and memories of collecting cans to help pay for dinner. And we know the climate crisis also disproportionately impacts people of color and poor people.

Looking at these impacts, must we forgive those responsible, so we can move on? Actually, in reading Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's book, *On Repentance and Repair*, she states that in Judaism, you are not obligated to forgive. You can make a choice to forgive, but you do not need to rush it. I also want to call out the distinction between forgiveness and healing. Sometimes, doing the deep work of healing through therapy, self care, giving and receiving love, may mean not forgiving. We may not be ready to forgive the people who don't use their positions of power to phase out fossil fuels, and we don't have to forgive people who have not asked for forgiveness or expressed their remorse. Instead, we can center the voices of those impacted by the harm, and focus on the healing work that we need to do for those- affected- communities.

Now, turning to asking forgiveness for ways in which we missed the mark. Going back to Rabbi Guttenberg's book, when I read through the steps involved in teshuva, what caught **my** attention was the statement, "humbly accepting the fact that actions have consequences." How do we preserve the earth with the time we have left?

So, how do we change? How do we ask for forgiveness? My friend Joel recently shared with me Rabbi Rav Kook's teaching. He said that true teshuvah involves not just changing our actions (such as no longer causing harm). Teshuvah is when we address the root source of where we have erred. We have to not only change our immediate actions but we have to change our ways. This includes sustained work to change our mindset which involves a lot of reflection and personal work for real transformational change. In responding to the climate crisis, we can move towards a society that centers the values of Judaism: community, caring for the vulnerable, and life over profits.

Am I, are we ready to acknowledge where we may have fallen short, and commit to real change? Am I, are we, ready to look at not just our individual responsibilities but our collective ones and see how we can improve? Perhaps we did not do enough to address the climate crisis and while we mourn the deaths and destruction of for example Maui, we remain complicit, well knowing that our direct actions are increasing global warming affecting future generations. Part of repentance happens when we finally do it right when given the next opportunity. And then committing to really changing our ways going forward. Will we decide to take individual action like walking biking, or taking the bus instead of driving? Will we give up unnecessary plane flights and reconsider our diets?

Even more significantly, will we actively demand our government leaders to create policies that are better for the planet? Will we really make time and energy on this important work?

That is what is so powerful about this time from rosh hashanah to yom kippur. It is **dedicated time** to reflect on, what we can do better. It is a time to think about healing and change. My son Max recently asked me why there is concentrated time once a year to reflect on the past and how to do better. Why, he asked, do we not do this every day?

I answered him that of course it would be better to think about this every day. Heck, my profession as an auditor is to strive for continuous improvement to make city services better. But, to be honest, most of us don't make the time. I know I don't. Just thinking about this through writing this drash has given me the time to really consider how to do better. When reflecting on the climate, I also acknowledge my own shortcomings in both my personal consumer choices, but also, in not using my voice enough to make change. We can seek to renew by making a commitment to be more vocal, and make elected officials, like me, more accountable. We must also work to build coalitions with each other to collectively address climate change. I was recently at an AAPI summit, and the next day at a jewish community relations council retreat. A message from both of these events reminded me of the power of working together. We can't combat all of these injustices individually. We need to be allies across different communities, to have a chance of teshuva. So, for those of you who are already taking individual action and want to renew your commitment, thank you, and let's do more. To those who want to take action in this coming year, I welcome you. But remember, we must work together, and it's important to start.

I'd like to conclude with this story about Rabbi Akiva: He was tending to sheep when he saw drops of water falling on a huge stone – drip, drop. Akiva saw Rachel, his master's daughter, and exclaimed. "Do you think there is hope for me? Suppose I began to study the Torah, little by little, drop by drop. Do you think my stony heart would soften up?" But I am forty years old! Is it not too late to start?"

"O no, Akiva. It is never too late. If you promise to learn our holy [Torah](#), I know you will not be ignorant for long."

Rabbi Akiva often said that it was a drop of water that changed his life.

So that's what we need to do. Do the work of healing and committing to real change. It is not too late to start. Just as it wasn't too late for me to learn to dive again. Drop by drop, and soon enough, each of us can make that dive into the water and be on our way. And with our collective action and solidarity, we can together take real steps to restore our precious planet and ourselves. I thought about the moment of stepping on the narrow diving board, knowing that the dive was like mitzrayim, or coming out of a narrow place, and into the expansive pool of water. May you all have the courage to let go of that narrow place, and flow into the possibilities of expansiveness.

Shana Tova.