

## **Internal/External: Two Stories of Teshuvah**

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By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

To bring us into this sacred time, I want to tell you two stories of teshuvah, one internal and one external.

You cannot translate teshuvah in one word. You just can't. Many people do: repentance, which is actually one of the worst translations. Like any deeply charged spiritual term in any tradition, you have to offer multiple words for it.

Turning—you are turning back to God, returning to the Divine presence moment to moment. And teshuvah is working on ourselves to grow, to transform, to change, to turn from actions and ways of being that are destructive to actions that are constructive, that bring healing.

The first story is from Reb Nachman, the great Hasidic rebbe, who died in 1810.

“A young boy went off into the world and returned after many years to his father's house after becoming a master artisan, specializing in the crafting of chandeliers.

Claiming to be the most skilled chandelier maker in all the land he asked his father to invite all the other artisans in town to come and view his prize chandelier. The father did this, and to his surprise, the town's artisans were not entirely pleased with what they saw in the chandelier.

In fact each of them found fault with it—and they had pretty strong reactions. But when asked what they found unpleasing about the chandelier, they each found something different in it that bothered them. They simply could not agree on what its flaw was.

In fact, what one person found defective in it and other found to be its most beautiful feature!

The father turned to his son and asked for an explanation, at which point the son replied,

“By this have I shown my great skill. For I have revealed to each one their own flaw, since each of these flaws was actually in the one who perceived it.

It was these flaws that I incorporated into my creation, for I made this chandelier only from flaws. But in truth, I can bring about the chandelier’s tikkun, its fixing.<sup>1</sup>”

That’s the end of the story.

There is great power in the flaw, but we, like the artisans, don’t want to see it.

This past spring, I was taking a series of classes about the kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Ari. He lived in the mid-1500s, most famously for two short years in Tzafat in northern Israel. The influence of the Ari on subsequent Judaism is difficult to overstate. Some have called him the last “Jewish world rabbi,” meaning that he was the last rabbi who was revered by almost the entire Jewish world – all of the Ashkenazi world as well as the multiple branches of the Sephardi Mizrahi world.

One of the great innovations of the Ari is the myth of the shattering of the vessels, the primordial vessels, which as part of the creation process could not hold the divine light that flowed into them and so they shattered, creating sparks of divine light in all things that need to be raised up and reunited with their Source. The important thing here is that for the Ari, breaking and brokenness isn’t really a problem – it’s part of the divine intent from the beginning.

One particular focus in the kabbalah of the Ari is reincarnation.

Reincarnation is a central belief, almost a dogma in Kabbalah...you know, just as it is in Reconstructionism. Just kidding.

According to the teacher of the class I was taking, Avraham Leader, the Ari focused on reincarnation because he was particularly interested in the idea that each of us have a particular purpose in our lifetimes. In the Ari’s view,

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<sup>1</sup> One telling of this story can be found [here](#).

each of us is trying to make a particular tikkun, based on the nature of our soul, but we don't usually know what that tikkun is. Tikkun is another one of those impossible-to-translate-into-a-single-word terms in Hebrew, but here it means healing, repair, rectification.

Now – and here's the point – in the Ari's view, we get insight into the particular tikkun we need to make in this lifetime not through cultivation and knowledge of our strengths, but through insight and awareness into our essential flaw, our *chisaron* in Hebrew. "The already "fixed" parts of one's being is basically there for the ride and to support the process, but not for transformation."<sup>2</sup> So Reb Nachman took the Ari's teaching and made it into a story to teach us the power of the flaw.

So think about it: what is that one element of your deep personal wiring that you most struggle with, that you wish was different, that every year appears on your teshuvah list in some significant way or another?

**And so now I invite you to hold out the possibility that there might be something really powerful there, something that could be absolutely essential to the particular tikkun or tikkunim your neshamah needs to make.**

As we think about how we approach working on ourselves, on our work of teshuvah: What if our greatest flaw is our greatest gift?

What if it is the central element of the tikkun that each of us need to do in the world? It's like one of Rabbi Daria's favorite verses from the psalms that we sing in Hallel: *even maasu ha'bonim hayita l'rosh pina*. The stone that the builders rejected has become the foundation stone.<sup>3</sup>

For those of you in committed long-term partnerships, pay close attention to core issues with your partner here; you probably have some issue (or maybe two or three) that recurs over and over again. Instead of something difficult to struggle against, how might that issue be essential to your tikkun? You could apply this to other very close relationships as well.

This is not a simple teaching. It's like a koan in Zen. We each need to sit with it a while to access its insight.

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<sup>2</sup> Avraham Leader, personal communication.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 118:22.

And now we pivot to the external world, to Montgomery, Alabama in fact. This is a story that was told to the acclaimed playwright and actor Anna Deavere Smith by the late great Congressman John Lewis. I'm going to tell it to you in the first person, as Rep. Lewis told it:

I have been going back to Selma every year since 1965, to commemorate the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, that took place on March 7, 1965. But we usually stop in...Montgomery for a day. And then we go to Selma.

On one trip to Montgomery, we stopped at First Baptist Church, the church that was pastored by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy. It's the same church where I met Dr. Martin Luther King and the Reverend Abernathy, in the spring of 1958.

A young police officer—the chief—came to the church to speak on behalf of the mayor, who was not available. The church was *full*. Black. White. Latino. Asian American. Members of Congress. Staffers. Family members, children, and grandchildren.

“What happened in Montgomery 52 years ago durin’ the Freedom Rides was not right,” the chief said. “The police department didn’t show up. They allowed an angry mob to come and beat you,” and he said, “Congressman? I’m sorry for what happened. I want to apologize. This is not the Montgomery that we want Montgomery to be. This is not the police department that I want to be the chief of.

Before any officers are hired,” he said, “they go through trainin’. They have to study the life of Rosa Parks. The life of Martin Luther King Jr. They have to visit the historic sites of the movement. They have to know what happened in Birmingham, and what happened in Montgomery, and what happened in Selma.”

He said, “I want you to forgive us.” He said, “To show the respect that I have for you and for the movement, I want to take off my badge and give it to you.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Amazingly, I found out right after I gave this sermon that Molly Friedman, who grew up in Oseh and is the daughter of Andy and Beth Friedman, was actually physically present at this event. She has shared with me a video of the Montgomery chief of police speaking to Rep. Lewis. If you email me, I can forward the video on to you.

And the church was so quiet. No one sayin' a word. And I stood up to accept the badge. And I started cryin'. And everybody in the church started cryin'.

And I said, "Chief. I cannot accept your badge. I'm not worthy to accept your badge. [*Long pause.*] Don't you need it?" He said, "Congressman Lewis, I can get another one. I want you to have my badge!"

And I took it. And I will hold on to it forever. But he hugged me. I hugged him. I cried some more. And you had Democrats and Republicans in the church. *Cryin'*. And his young deputy assistant—a young African American—was sittin' down. He couldn't stand. He cried so much, like a baby, really.

It was the first time that a police chief in any city where I visited, or where I got arrested or beaten durin' the '60s, ever apologized. It was a moment of grace. It was a moment of reconciliation. The chief was very young—he was not even born 52 years ago. So he was offerin' an apology and to be forgiven on behalf of his associates, his colleagues of the past ...

For the police chief to come and apologize, to ask to be forgiven—it felt so good, and at the same time so freein' and liberatin'. I felt like, you know, I'm not worthy. You know, I'm just one. I'm just one of the many people who were beaten.

It is amazing grace.

You know the line in there, "Saved a wretch like me?" In a sense, it's saying that we all have fallen short! 'Cause we're all just tryin' to just make it! We're all searching! As Dr. King said, we were out to redeem the soul of America. But we first have to redeem ourselves.

This message—this act of grace, of the badge—says to me, "Hold on." And, "Never give up. Never give in. Never lose faith. Keep the faith."<sup>5</sup>

When I first read this story, staying up too late at night getting tempted by this article, I cried. What an incredible, jaw-dropping act of tikkun, of public teshuvah.

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<sup>5</sup> I discovered this story in a recent Atlantic article [here](#). You can also see a video of Smith telling part of the story [here](#).

The Gemara says: “The place where the baal teshuvah stands, even the complete tzadik, the completely righteous cannot stand.”<sup>6</sup> When you hear a story like this you get something of what the rabbis meant.

One of the amazing things about that story is it shows you we just don’t know the timeline. We don’t understand how things are unfolding. Great teshuvah can happen for an event that took place 50 years prior. We just don’t know.

We hold open the space for healing; the gates of teshuvah are always open, but we will never understand the timeline. As Dr. King said, the arc of history may be long, but it bends towards justice—sometimes, that has to be on the level of *emunah*, of trust.

This can give us some hope when we are stuck in the mire of our current political situation, of the flagrant violation of law and norm as we witness the abject cruelty of our current government, as well as the current government in Israel. The power of teshuvah always remains, even if it is 50 years after the fact.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was far from perfect, but who would have ever thought something like it could have been possible? One day there will be a true reckoning for our genocide of Native Americans, and for our enslavement of African-Americans. One day there will be a true reckoning for the horrific things Israelis and Palestinians have done to each other. *Ba yom hahu...*

May we tap into the power of this sacred time as we do the internal and external work of teshuvah for ourselves, as we contemplate and envision the work of teshuvah for our country as well.

Shanah tovah.

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<sup>6</sup> [Talmud Brachot 34b](#).