

Yom Kippur Morning 2019/5780 - What Is Our Commitment?

I want to begin with a story of transformation, because that is what today is supposed to be about. A week ago I believe I met a genuine *tzadik*, Emil Deweaver. A black man from Oakland and he told me a story of transformation, of genuine *teshuvah*. At JCHS we regularly bring in speakers to address our students on topics that have to do with the world outside of high school. This time of year we try to bring in someone who can speak to the topics of teshuvah or forgiveness or something relevant to these Days of Awe. So I came to hear Emil Deweaver. He grew up in Oakland. I'm guessing he was born around 1980. His parents divorced. His mother worked multiple jobs to support the family. He didn't do well in school, as a teen he started running with gangs. He dealt drugs and, when he was 17, he murdered a man. He was tried as an adult and in 1987 he was sentenced to 68 years to life in prison. He makes no excuses for any of this. He knows he committed horrible crimes and did great wrong in the world..

Before he began telling us his story, he said he had never spoken to a Jewish audience before. To prepare for his talk he researched the High Holy Days and he was struck by the role of the Shofar. How the shofar blasts are supposed to wake us up from our habits and routines; from the way we sleep-walk through our lives. So he told us the story of his awakening. This gives us an insight into the Emil Deweaver of today, thoughtful, open, curious, with a desire to learn and to connect. But that was not the Emil Deweaver of twenty years ago: the failed student, the gang member, the murderer. Here is what he told us about how he got from there to here.

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The first moment of awakening was when he saw his daughter for the first time. She was born while he was in Alameda County Jail awaiting sentencing. He saw her for the first time when she was two weeks old. He looked into her eyes, saw her innocence and the potential in her bright eyes and realized that she was black and female - two strikes against her already - and understood that now she would be without a father as well, strike three. He also thought that when she got older and her friends asked her what her father did, she would have to lie or say he was serving a life term in prison and bear all the shame that would bring. In that moment he understood that he had betrayed his daughter and set her up for failure. He decided, later that day, that he would find a way to make her proud of him. That he would change. He made a vow to never use violence again. The one thing he thought he knew how to do, besides crime, was to write. So he decided he would write his way out of prison. He didn't know how he would accomplish any of this. He just made the commitment to change and to live out that commitment.

Emil spent the next 9 years in a "supermax" prison in the high desert of California. During that time he never got in a fight. Remember, this is prison, where the prisoners are segregated along racial lines, where power is exercised through violence, where black gangs and hispanic gangs and white gangs vie with each other for power and protection. He read and he wrote and after nine years of being a "model prisoner" he was transferred to San Quentin which is maximum security but not a super max. He was proud of himself. Of the changes he had gone through and the person he had become. Then one day he received a note (through the underground inmate

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communication system) from a prisoner on another cell block. He was a young prisoner, from Oakland, just like Emil. When he read the note, his heart broke, this prisoner wrote, "I'm from the same neighborhood that you are and I want you to know that I'm acting in a way that brings respect to our neighborhood and will make you proud." His heart broke and, by the way, he stopped his presentation here and took about a minute to gather himself before he could continue, so I knew he was speaking from his heart. His heart broke because he realized that despite the changes he had gone through, the renunciation of violence, the thirst for knowledge, the desire to become a good person, despite the fact that he was no longer the young man who had been sentenced to life nine years before, his reputation in his neighborhood had not changed and young men were still following his example, dealing drugs, using violence to get their way and killing people.

That was his second wake up call. Emil realized then that his own internal transformation was not enough. He had to find a way to serve his community that he had harmed so much when he lived there. So he found other prisoners who wanted to make a change. Together, they founded Prison Renaissance where prisoners could find constructive outlets for self-expression through art. They created Prison University where inmates could study for their AA degree. By the way, prisoners who participate in education programs have 43% lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not, according to a study by the RAND Corporation.¹ They also advocated for State Senate

¹ Davis, Lois M., Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles, Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to

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bills 260 that allowed youth under age 18 who were sentenced as adults to have their sentences reviewed after serving 10 years and Senate Bill 261 that extended that review to prisoners who were under age 22 when sentenced. Last December, after serving 21 years in prison, Governor Brown commuted Emil's sentence for time served. Today he works for a hi-tech firm, he speaks, and he advocates for social justice and prison reform.

I take the time to share this story with you because I think it is truly remarkable. I also wanted to share it with you in case you think change is not possible. I don't think any of us have *teshuva* that is as profound as Emil's. Neither have we faced the need to change under such extreme circumstances and from such a place of deep, deep sinfulness, such a long way from the path of decent behavior, or with so little sense of hope. But real change is what Yom Kippur is about. Turning from our old habitual path and waking up, to be fully human. We know that real change is difficult, being better people, more empathetic, more compassionate, more caring, and changing old habits that get in the way. Most people don't want to do it, which is why most of us consistently fail to fulfill our resolutions that we make with such honorable intentions. But Emil's experience teaches us that change is possible... in any circumstances.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 118, מִן־הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְיָ עָנְנִי בַמַּרְחָב יְיָ: The standard JPS translation is "In distress I called on ADONAI; the Lord answered me and brought me

Incarcerated Adults. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html.

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relief.” But that doesn’t really capture the Hebrew, the word *meitzar* describes a place of restriction, of narrowness, and *merhav* comes from *rachav* meaning expansiveness.

There is a translation by Viktor Frankle, from his book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” about his time in Auschwitz, that I think is closer to the intended meaning of the Hebrew, he wrote “I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.” This describes Emil Deweaver’s *teshuvah*, his transformation as a human being, from a deeply troubled young man to his release from prison and his opportunity for a new chance at life.

It is the Reform custom to read part of Parashat Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9-14 and 30:1-20) on Yom Kippur morning. This portion is a difficult one. It’s main focus is on the existential necessity of following God’s mitzvot if we want to live and prosper. I don’t know why our Reform rabbis chose it, since the theology is so basic. Follow my laws and thrive or disobey me and suffer; and further, as Reform Jews, none of us feel a commitment to follow Jewish religious law because we believe God commanded us to do so. It seems to me reading this portion is a set up for failure or, at the least, alienation. Blah, blah, blah, more words of Torah that don’t say anything to any of us. But we sit here and listen because we are polite. So why did they choose it? We could have read the traditional portion about the scapegoat ritual on Yom Kippur when the Temple stood. It’s not relevant either, but at least it is historical and doesn’t require us to hear an exhortation we know we will not follow.

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But the next to the last verse in our portion reads, **וְהֵקַלְלָהּ וְהִבְרִיכָהּ לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרִכָּה וְהַקְּלָלָהּ** חַיִּים וְהַמּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרִכָּה וְהַקְּלָלָהּ. “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—” I have always struggled with this verse. It seems so extreme in its rhetoric. What does this mean, that God tells us to choose between life and death? Who wouldn't choose life? Who would want death?

Emil Deweaver's story is the answer to this question. God's challenge is not about whether we live or die, or how long we live. These choices are out of our hands. Rather, God is asking us how we will choose to live. What kind of life we want to live. Will it be one of meaning or a walking death? What does it mean to choose life? Emil Deweaver wrote, “Some people might consider murder a point of no return, but my mother taught me that it's never too late to turn around and change your life. My daughter saved my life. She was born, and love transformed me. Before her, I didn't care about anything, not even myself. But she gave me a reason to keep going, and on that journey, loving her taught me how to love myself.” And Viktor Frankle wrote as he described his experience being marched in the winter predawn darkness to another day of slave labor, “A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth — that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire... The salvation of man is through love and in love.” And commenting on this verse of Torah Ibn Ezra, the great Jewish poet of the Spanish Golden Age wrote, “The phrase that you may live may mean living corporeally, or it may mean to live on in memory. Scripture

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then proceeds to explain that to love is the purpose of life.” The message is so simple and so powerful. We must transform our lives and our world through love. Real teshuvah is stripping away all the defenses, all the selfishness, or the fear, and working our way down through our pain to the deep internal core which is our capacity to love. That love is divine. That is the original self we are trying to reach. We heal ourselves and we can heal our world through love. May we be blessed this year with true *teshuvah*, may we return to our true selves, may we be blessed with love. G'mar Tov.