

The Day After Tomorrow: Achieving our Goals with *Hitlamdut* and *Bechira*

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It's Yom Kippur. Again. We've made it through the 10 days of Teshuva; We've said our *Ashamnus* and our *Al Chets*; confessed our wrongdoings, acknowledged the ways we've mistreated others or shirked our responsibilities. Again.

Today, again, we consider who we want to be in the world. We resolve to be a more loving and less reactive parent/child/friend/sibling/partner. To be more confident and assertive in the workplace. To have better work-life balance or engage in more self care. To be more open-minded. To... you fill in the blank.

Tomorrow, the day after Yom Kippur, we will go back to our daily routines with a spring in our step and a sense of renewed commitment to do better, to be better. Then we will go to bed and wake up and it's the day *after* the day after Yom Kippur!

We might overhear some gossip by the proverbial water cooler and not be able to resist sharing that information with a coworker. Our child, spouse, or friend, does that thing that drives us crazy, and our newfound patience goes out the window. The pastries at Starbucks call out to us with intense yearning to be eaten. We are "too busy" to exercise.

Rabbi Shai Held has said: "Often the 12th of Tishrei (two days after Yom Kippur) is among the most depressing days of the year for me. It is the day when I realize that I have a lot of the same shortcomings that I did on [Kol Nidre]."¹

Perhaps for you, it's not on the 12th of Tishrei, but a few weeks or months later... inevitably, we see our shortcomings coming back to haunt us. We fall back into old patterns. We let routine set our ways.

Our High Holiday liturgy understands this human condition. The *Kol Nidre* prayer is a revocation of any *future* vows that we find we cannot keep. We come back every year to the same *Ashamnu* & *Al Heyt* for a reason. We are human, we are going to mess up, clean up, and mess up again.² On the other hand, as Einstein is

¹Rabbi Shai Held <https://elmad.pardes.org/2017/09/why-dont-people-ever-seem-to-change-and-how-we-could/>

²The introduction to this sermon is drawn from

<https://rabbi-lauren.medium.com/failing-a-little-less-growing-a-little-more-tikkun-middot-as-a-jewish-spiritual-path-4385723c6304>

purported to have said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” While it is not really true, and Einstein didn’t actually say it,³ the point is well taken.

If we know that we are going to mess up, the question is, what can we do differently this year to mess up a little less; to achieve some of the growth we imagine for ourselves on Yom Kippur?

In quintessentially Jewish fashion, first we need to consider another question: What is it that keeps getting in the way of meeting our Yom Kippur goals?

After we ‘try and try again again’ to change without success, we tend to give up and explain it away with what I’ll call the Popeye Principle: “I yam what I yam and that’s all what I yam. I’m Popeye the sailor man!”⁴ We excuse our failure to change by saying “I can’t do anything about it; it’s just who I am.”

Centuries ago, long before modern psychology Maimonides understood that we are profoundly shaped by our temperaments, our environments, and our circumstances and traumas, and by choices that become habituated over time. In the Mishne Torah’s section on Human Dispositions⁵ he says “Some character traits we have from birth; some we learn, other traits we accustom ourselves to until they become a part of us.”

But, argues Rabbi Shai Held, “that’s just who I am” is a kind of heresy.⁶ In Exodus, when Moses asks for God’s identity, God’s response is “*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*”⁷ Although often translated - I would argue mis-translated as “Am who I am,” *Ehyeh* is in the future tense, not the present. *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is “I am becoming who I am becoming.” God is always in the process of becoming, and we, created in God’s image, are as well.

The task of *Teshuva* is to acknowledge that the powerful forces that shaped us - for good or ill - are neither fate nor destiny. Rabbi Held observes, “The commitment to [teshuva] is born precisely in the space between being *impacted* by something and being *determined* by it.”⁸ If we get too attached to the narratives of who we are and how we got that way, we inhibit that process and prevent ourselves from becoming who we can be.

³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/einstein-s-parable-of-quantum-insanity/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHmunZxJeM>

⁵ Hichot De’ot 1:1

⁶ Held, op. cit.

⁷ Exodus 3:14

⁸ Op. Cit

In Deuteronomy, Moses says to the Israelites “*Anochi omed bein Adonai uveineichem* - I was standing between you and God.”⁹ Rabbi Yechiel of Zlotchev, a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov, interprets this to mean that what gets in the way between us and God is the *ANOCHI* - the ego, or self-absorbed I - that stands between us and God.

There's an episode in the old show *Mad About You* where Jamie is having a conflict with her parents and asks Paul with a sigh, “How is it my parents know how to push all my buttons?” Paul answers, “That's easy - they installed them.” With hard work, we can disable those buttons if we are willing to stop using them as an excuse for our behavior.

The mystics teach that on Rosh Hashanah the doors of wisdom swing open to us, to help direct our choices for the coming year. We need help, because choosing the *better path often* means choosing the *harder* path. It is hard to choose patience when we are harried, to choose compassion when we are angry, to choose humility when we feel slighted, to choose courage when we are afraid, to choose faith in our grief. It's hard, but not impossible.

The key to doing better the day after tomorrow is to remember that we do have a choice. We read just a few moments ago: I have put before you *Chayim v'mavet*: aliveness and deadness, blessing and curse.¹⁰ *Uvacharta vachayim*. Choose aliveness, that you may live. The sages of Mussar call the moment of choosing a point of *Bechira* from the word *Uvacharta* in our Torah portion.

Bechira points are not just any decision-making moment. They are the moments that challenge us to really stop and change direction. On Rosh Hashana I spoke about how we Jews are called *Ivrim* - transitioners. Our Torah stories tell over and over of the many hard choices our ancestors had to make in order to become the Jews - Abraham had to choose to leave all he knew and follow God. Moses's mother had to choose to leave her infant son in a basket in the reeds. The Israelites had to choose to step into an as yet unparted red sea, and then to enter into covenant with an invisible God. I'm sure none of these choices were easy, and each could certainly have gone a different way.

Bechira points are those moments when we need to make an effort to cross over from what is familiar to something better. As Maimonides recognized centuries

⁹ Deuteronomy 5:5

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30:19

ago we are conditioned by many factors to behave and think in certain ways. The sages of Mussar and modern brain scientists agree that most of the decisions we make on any given day are automatic, conditioned responses.

Israeli psychologist and Nobel Laureate Dr. Daniel Kahneman offers a simple example.¹¹ If I say “Jane went to the bank,” you will immediately conjure an image, most likely of a financial institution. Only if I ask you to slow down and think about it, will you realize there are other possibilities: a riverbank, for example, or a blood bank, or a food bank, which will then lead you to different conclusions about Jane. Dr Kahneman emphasizes that in that moment when I said “bank” you made an unconscious choice, without any awareness of choosing, about what that word means. He also gives a wonderful example of a conversation with his wife, but you’ll have to listen to the lecture for that.

The *Bechira* point is the moment when our habits or unconscious choices collide with our understanding of the right thing to do....when we wake up to what is happening and become aware that there are other options.

There is a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon¹² where notoriously naughty Calvin wishes that Santa would consider a kid’s predisposition when making his list. Calvin says, “I mean, does he even consider a kid’s disposition? If some sickeningly wholesome nerd *likes* being good, it’s easy for him to meet the standards. There’s no challenge! The true test of one’s mettle is being good when one has an innate inclination towards evil.” Calvin then goes on to slam his friend Suzie with a snowball, commenting to Hobbs, “I wanted to put a rock in it, but I didn’t. That should count for a lot!”

Nor is it any harder when the choice is so far outside our values or interests that we aren't even tempted¹³. Deciding not to take something that doesn’t belong to me is not a *Bechira* point, nor was, for me, getting vaccinated against Covid. A true choice point is when choosing really is a challenge.

Every time my young adult daughters are struggling with a problem, my instinct as their mom is to rush in and fix the problem. I know that this is not good parenting. I know they have to learn to work things out for themselves, and that they probably don’t even want me to fix it, and yet, there I go again, offering solutions or lectures instead of support. Each phone call from Rose or Sarah is a

¹¹ Dr. Daniel Kahneman, longnow.org/seminars/02013/aug/13/thinking-fast-and-slow/

¹² https://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1992/12/20#.U_TpNNvbQ_Z

¹³ <https://images.shulcloud.com/428/uploads/PDFs/the-bechirah-point-rabbi-e-dessler.pdf>

Bechira point for me, challenging me to pause, take a breath, and choose to respond differently *this* time.

Bechira points are when our conditioned habits meet choice and wake us up. They are the powerful moments when we realize that we can *respond* rather than *react* in a given situation, that we can choose to behave differently than we always have. It takes wisdom and also courage to step up to the line and resolve to cross over. These lines are different for each person, and for any given person they are constantly moving targets. Becoming aware of our choice points takes practice, and each choice makes the next one a little easier, until the better behavior becomes automatic.

So how do we become attuned to these moments of decision? Dr. Kahneman calls it using system 2 thinking or effortful thinking; The Mussar tradition in Judaism calls it *Hitlamdut*. *Hitlamdut*, literally self-learning, means cultivating a stance of curiosity and openness towards all of life's experiences and internalizing what we learn. It means slowing down our response in any given situation, and opening ourselves to what choices we have in that moment. *Hitlamdut* is curious, non-judgmental awareness.

In our Machzor there is a quote from Einstein: "Never lose a holy curiosity."¹⁴ I suspect he is talking about the mysteries of the universe, but it applies equally to human behavior.

Julie Dean, a mussar teacher from our own community illustrates *Hitlamdut* and *Bechira* with a moment in a department store.

"While making a return at a department store I noticed a very obese man walking toward the counter. I averted my eyes, a reaction conditioned by years of being told 'not to stare.' ...[In a moment of clarity, I paused,] and asked myself, "What am I doing? Why am I looking away?" I realized that averting my eyes was essentially denying his personhood and the reality of his divine spark. Surely, he too was created *B'tzelem Elo-him* - in the image of God.

At that moment, I realized I had a choice. I could continue looking away knowing that I was participating in silent shaming or I could respond differently. I turned to greet him with a heartfelt smile. I said something

¹⁴Quoted in Mishkan Hanefesh page 223; original citation on page 686

that made us both laugh and felt a sincere connection. At that moment, I committed to paying attention when I felt inclined to avert my eyes from someone.¹⁵

Hitlamdut is both self-learning, and also non-judgemental curiosity about others. This is invaluable in our intimate relationships. We can learn to pre-empt that same old argument we always have, by instead pausing to wonder - without judgement - what is behind our loved one's behavior. *Hitlamdut* as non-judgemental curiosity is also effective in difficult conversations. If I'm talking to someone on the opposite side of the political aisle, instead of simply trying to convince them of my side, I might take a step back and with curiosity - not judgement - wonder to myself or ask directly, what brought them to their position. Chances are I will be surprised by their answer and come to understand them a little better. And they might respond in kind.

Hitlamdut begins with taking a breath, putting a pause between stimulus and response. On Rosh Hashanah I quoted James Baldwin, who said "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers."¹⁶ *Hitlamdut* lays bare the questions hidden in our habituated behaviors, and finding in those questions liberating alternatives. Practicing *Hitlamdut* enables us to slowly exchange our habituated behaviors for chosen ones, and ultimately to achieve the goals we set on Yom Kippur.

We read from the Torah scroll this morning: This day I call heaven and earth to witness regarding you: Aliveness and deadness I have set before you, blessing and curse. *Uvacharta*. Choose aliveness. Choose decisions over habits. Choose to pause, breathe, and ask yourself "what am I to learn from this moment?" It isn't easy. Habits are very hard to change, and we have to practice over and over, but, as we also read from the Torah this morning: This thing is neither beyond you nor far away. It is not in heaven, nor across the sea; No, it is so very near to you in your mouth and in your heart - that you can surely do it.¹⁷ The day after tomorrow.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon- may it be God's will.

¹⁵ Abridged from <https://mailchi.mp/mussarinstitute/elul-5781-day-5630753?e=98a63f824e>

¹⁶ For the provenance of this attribution see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/04/06/hides/>

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 30:13

