

Rosh Hashana 5768
Temple Shir Tikva Rabbi Greg Litcofsky
“The Repentant Teacher”¹

There was once a great and wise teacher named Moshe - so wise and great was he that students young and old would come from far and wide just to attend his classes. The reason people came from all over just to learn with Moshe was the way in which he treated each and every student with love, care and compassion.

At the end of another day of teaching Moshe set out from school on his nightly walk home. Since it was just a few days before Rosh Hashana, Moshe took the opportunity on the brisk Elul fall night to think about the past year. He thought about all the students with whom he learned, he thought about the ones whom perhaps he could have treated with more compassion and patience and he thought about the people he may have hurt in the past year and how he would like to make amends with them. As he continued his walk home his thoughts turned to his childhood.

You see, the town in which he taught just also happened to be the town in which he grew up. When he was just about ten years old Moshe’s parents sent him off to learn with a great rabbi in a far off town. Moshe remembered with a smile his tall skinny teacher with a long brown beard and tiny glasses on the tip of his nose who began each and every class with the words

Be flexible like the reed – that is kind to everyone – and never be like the cedar tree – that is unbending and unforgiving to those who hurt or insult you.

¹ This story was adapted from a version told in “Tales of Elijah the Prophet” by Peninnah Schram entitled “The Repentant Rabbi” p.209. In Schram’s version as well as others the holy beggar is considered to be the Prophet Elijah.

Moshe always did his best to follow the words of his teacher, but this was not always the case. Moshe stopped on that cold night and his heart began to ache as he recalled an encounter he had with a holy beggar many years ago.

It happened the year the day after graduation on the beginning of his long journey home. After years and years of school he was finally ready to become a teacher himself. As he set out on those many years ago, Moshe was stopped by a beggar on the side of the road. "Please sir, please sir..." cried the beggar. Moshe was so filled with excitement that he barely even noticed the poor creature tugging at his legs. "Please sir, please sir"...cried the beggar again in a soft shaky voice. Moshe looked down and saw a hunched over man, dressed in rags, with a crooked nose and sad dark eyes.

Moshe barely slowed down as he yelled "Have I been gone so long that my home town would be filled with such poor and wretched creatures like you? If so do I even want to go home?"

The beggar hurt by the harsh words began to follow Moshe saying "I do not know, but you should ask the artist who made me!"

With his head in the clouds Moshe ignored the beggar even as he walked by his side. But then, all of sudden Moshe heard the words of his teacher "Be flexible like the reed and never be like the cedar tree!"

Moshe stopped dead in his tracks, turned to the beggar and fell to his knees. "Sir, Sir, I beg your forgiveness, I have sinned against you, I have hurt you with my words and my actions, and I am sorry, please sir forgive me!"

The beggar looked down at Moshe and said “Your words have stung and hurt me and are not easily taken back nor easily forgiven. I may forgive you, but you have also hurt the artist who made me – God!” “You must also ask God’s forgiveness as well! Moshe pleaded again “Please, my words were hurtful, I hurt you, I was wrong and I am sorry.” “God, creator of the world, creator of this gentle man, please forgive me, my words have hurt you and my actions were wrong...I ask forgiveness.”

The holy beggar helped Moshe to his feet, as he granted him forgiveness.

Despite receiving forgiveness from the beggar Moshe arrived home with a heavy heart. The day after he arrived home he entered the classroom to teach for the very first time and with a quite but confident voice Moshe taught his students “ Be flexible like the reed – that is kind to everyone – and never be like the cedar tree – that is unbending and unforgiving to those who hurt or insult you...and these are the words with which Moshe begins each and every class since that very first day – in honor of his teacher but more importantly to remind himself of his encounter with the holy beggar.

Each and every day of our lives we are all faced with choices...choices on how to behave and how to act towards and treat other people. What does it mean to be flexible like the reed and never be like the cedar tree? Weren’t these the words that helped Moshe recognize that what he had done was wrong?

Did we yell at our parents when we came home from school because we had a bad day? Did we do something mean to our brother or sister? Did we talk behind someone’s back? Did we send a nasty email because we were angry with someone at the office? Were we mean to the beggar along the side of the road because he didn’t look like us and we were in hurry to get home?

These are things we all do each and every day, weather on purpose or by accident...we make mistakes - we say and do things that hurt other people, just like Moshe the teacher. To be like the reed – that is kind to everyone we meet – doesn't necessarily mean being perfect, after all we are human and we will make mistakes. It means that when we hurt someone on purpose or by accident we do our best to recognize what we have done and find a way not to change the past but mend the future! Our Jewish tradition has given us a powerful tool through which we all can transform ourselves - just as Moshe did...we can do *teshuvah*!

When Moshe left the beggar behind after insulting him, he heard the words of his teacher and realized that what he had done was wrong! The first step then in doing *teshuvah* is recognizing our mistakes. Perhaps that joke I made wasn't really funny, but hurt my friend's feelings after all. Wow, when I ignored my little brother it must have really hurt. I know I was tired but I was wrong to have said that to my husband! Weather on purpose or by accident, there are times when we say and do things that are hurtful to our brothers, our mothers, our teachers, our husbands, our friends, and even strangers. In that moment or even long afterwards we may not realize that we have did was hurtful. But if we stop for a moment and think about our actions and our words...perhaps like Moshe we will be able to hear the words "be flexible like the reed..." Stop, listen and recognize...this is the first step towards doing *teshuvah* – recognize that we have done something wrong – recognize that we have hurt another person.

But Moshe's journey didn't end there. No, he stopped, turned around, admitted to his mistake and asked for forgiveness from the beggar. The second step in the process of

doing *teshuvah* is to admit out loud that we were wrong. Then we go to the person whom we hurt and say “I am sorry”, please forgive me!” This perhaps is the hardest part of the entire process, but the most important. It’s not enough to just recognize that we hurt somebody or even to admit it to ourselves or somebody else...*teshuvah* requires us to stop, face the person we hurt, apologize and ask forgiveness. There can be no excuses...no “I was running late”, or “I was angry at the teacher for how she treated me”...we simply say “I was wrong for what I said or what I did and I am sorry!”

Dad, I know that what I said to you was hurtful, I was angry, but that is no excuse, I am sorry, please forgive me! Mr. Cohen, I should never had done that in the middle of class, I know it was disrespectful, I am sorry, please forgive me! I never should have yelled at you, my temper got the best me, I was wrong, I am sorry, please forgive me. But just saying the words “I am sorry” isn’t enough! The rabbis of our tradition teach us that in order to do real *teshuvah*, we must be sincere - we must really mean what we say. Remember how Moshe’s heart sank and his soul hurt knowing that what he had done was wrong...remorsefully and humbly he fell to his knees and cried, all as a result of how he behaved towards the beggar. Too often we quickly blurt out the word “sorry” without thinking about what it truly means The words “I am sorry” – must not be empty – they must be from the heart!

However, as we all know it is not always easy to forgive...there are times when we have hurt somebody deeply. “Thank you for your apology, it means so much to me that you would come to me and say sorry, but you hurt me and I am not sure that I can forgive you right now.” Forgiving somebody sometime is just as hard as saying sorry. But remember Moshe and his teacher also taught not to be as stiff as the cedar – that is –

when we are the ones who have been hurt. When someone asks us for forgiveness, we should do our best to accept their apology and forgive them. Holding on to our hurt can only cause more hurt and more pain. After all, if we expect to be forgiven shouldn't we forgive as well!

Forgiveness, as Moshe learned, can only come from the person whom we have hurt. It was the beggar and the beggar alone who could grant him pardon. *Teshuvah* does not grant us the luxury of avoiding the person whom we have hurt when they come our way, when they call us, or when they send us a text message. Part of taking responsibility for our actions is encountering the one whom we wronged face to face!

Therefore, even when we do something to hurt God it is God alone to whom we can turn for forgiveness. Just as in our story when the beggar pointed out that Moshe also hurt God, Moshe sought God's forgiveness. For all of us *Rosh Hashana* and Yom Kippur give us the very opportunity to approach God in prayer humbly and seek God's forgiveness for all that we have done against God in the past year.

Teshuvah however does not end here! There is one final step –we are required to promise to resolve ourselves to do our best to act more wisely in the future. The next time we have a bad day at school and we come home, will we take it out on our family or will we instead give them a hug. The next time we are in a hurry in line for coffee and the person taking your order isn't moving as fast as we would like, will we throw our money down on the counter or will we be patient with them and recognize that they too are busy. The next time we are driving will we drive with anger or will we take a deep breath and drive with compassion? The next time Moshe is walking along the road and

he encounters a beggar, will he say mean and hurtful things, or will he stop and offer help? Only we can chose how to act; only we can chose how we treat other people!

. To do *teshuvah*, is to transform ourselves into the people we know we can be. First we recognize the mistakes we have made and the people whom we have hurt. Second, we admit to the person whom have hurt that we were wrong, we make no excuses, and we ask forgiveness with sincerity and humility. Third, we take our experience to heart and we do our best not to do it again. Finally, we know we are transformed, we know we have done complete *teshuvah* when we are faced with a similar situation and we choose to act differently!

Teshuvah is usually translated as repentance, but its root means “turn” or “return.” When we do *teshuvah* we return not to the past, but rather we turn towards the future – we into the people we know we can be. *Teshuvah* is the act of belief in the future – *teshuvah* is a process by which we do not change the past but better ourselves in the present and the future

Take a moment now and think about one person, one moment where you acted poorly towards someone in the past year...right now take the first step towards complete *teshuvah* and recognize the wrong that you have committed...and between now and Yom Kippur do you best to hear the words of Moshe and his teacher “be as flexible as the reed” and to *teshuvah*!

Shana Tova