

Who Am I?

Rosh Hashanah Day 5769

1. Intro: Les Mis

One of my favorite musicals is Les Miserables. Following loosely Victor Hugo's story, it is a journey of self-realization for both Jon Valjean, the hero and protagonist, and the policemen who pursues him throughout, Javert. Jon Valjean has been condemned to jail for stealing a loaf of bread. Upon his release, he is given a yellow ticket of leave that he must show prospective employers. As a result, no one will hire him and he becomes progressively more desperate. Finally, he breaks into a church and steals the silver there. Caught by the police, priest gifts him with the silver and then challenges Jon Valjean to now make something of himself.

Valjean then starts a new life, ending up a prominent businessman and even Mayor. All the while, though, Javert is hunting him. Several years later, Javert, the French policeman, finally catches up with Valjean. However, Javert captures the wrong man, someone from the same town who looks almost identical! Valjean now wrestles with his conscience. He is the mayor of the town – prosperous and happy. If he lets the man be falsely arrested, he can live the rest of his life in security.

The key moment in the Broadway musical is when Jon Valjean sings the song Who am I. Javert is about to make a false arrest. Valjean wrestles with his own morality –

Can I condemn this man to slavery / Pretend I do not feel his agony
/ This innocent who bears my face / Who goes to judgment in my
place

He resolves in that moment his own struggle and takes responsibility. And so he reveals himself to Javert, with both his

name and now, for the first time, his prison number, 24601. He owns all of himself in that moment, even the prisoner held unjustly.

It is an heroic moment, all the more so because he realizes that self-knowledge includes a willingness to pay the price for his actions, to take responsibility and let no other bear that cost. Justice and injustice become irrelevant in this heroic moment of becoming the self by acting selflessly.

Jon Valjean's question, Who am I? is the central question of the High Holidays. We are readying ourselves to ask next Thursday as we confess our sins: Who are we? What is our lives, our goodness, our righteousness? We will take all the virtues that ought to define us and say most of our acts are vanity, hot air, before you.

2. Teshuvah as self discovery

So its time for us to being asking who we are. Certain moments in our lives makes us ask this question – reassess our values and even our self. The technical term for this is Teshuvah – repentance-discovery of self.

Maimonides wonderful definition:

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו
ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא
מיראה ולא מכשלון כח

So teshuvah is a process of change but also of self-discovery. I find myself in the new situation and I can resist my old sin. Not because of weakness or out of fear, but because I have discovered something new within myself. Perhaps I was tempted last time to share with you this juicy bit of gossip. And I did it. Because it made me feel like I belonged. Because it felt so good to pull someone else down. But now, I could do it. I have something else

really good to share. And I don't. I won't get caught. But I choose to discover in myself something else.

Maybe to realize that it my own insecurities that lead me to pull down someone else. To see that my own fears are somehow covered by gossiping about someone else. But I don't have to be like this. I can more directly confront who I am.

Such a moment of transformation, of self discovery can be about a specific behavior. Rav Kook calls this Teshuvah Rukhani – spiritual change, spiritual discovery. It is the realization that one thing, gossip, is wrong and I change, I discover within myself the capacity to overcome the habit, insecurities, and fears that lead me to gossip.

Rav Kook also talks about teshuvah naphshi klali – general teshuvah. Meaning a whole rediscovery of who I am. That is the moment when I realize the direction of my whole life is wrong, that I need to understand, to discover again how to answer the question who am I.

3. Barriers to change

We resist this kind of change because it is frightening, leaving us naked, vulnerable, exposed. Yet if we want to really change ourselves, it is an essential task.

Ernest Becker in his wonderful book the Denial of Death introduced me to the term Character Armor. It is the accretions over the years of protective gear that makes it safe to be out in the world. It's how I protect myself from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It's the means by which I hold myself safe, aloof. Javert has really good character armor. His strength comes from his rigidity, the unbending way in which he pursues the law even when that law is unjust.

We are experts in character armor today, especially in affluent places like Palo Alto. Madeline Levine, a psychologist and author in Marin County, captures this paradox of the need for character armor and the damage it does to us when she says in her book *The Price of Privilege*, “Many people choose not to expose their emotionally tender spots. For many of us, being wary comes from repeated experiences of not having our needs met when we were vulnerable. It makes sense to keep our guard up.”

Levine is warning us about the all the protective measures we create to keep ourselves emotionally safe. Our home is our castle. The moat our emotional defenses that keep anyone else from seeing my weaknesses, my failings, the chinks in my armor. We risk becoming empty within our suits of character armor, and then lose the capacity to discover ourselves anew.

These defensive measures, then, come at a cost. Madeline Levine sees many in her practice who, in her language, self medicate. The burden of wearing that armor is too great – so ambient, alcohol, harder stuff become the means by which I recover strength.

Clothing can be an expression of our character armor. The Torah describes the Cohanic garments in a way that explores these issues of fullness and emptiness, of how our clothes can symbolize our inner essence. The cohen gadol wore an elaborate garment with both paamonim – bells, - and rimonim- pomegranates. Exodus 28 describes these opposites as follows:

שמות פרק כח

וְעָשִׂיתָ עַל שׁוּלְיוֹ רִמּוֹנֵי תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי עַל שׁוּלְיוֹ סָבִיב וּפְעֻמּוֹתֵי זָהָב בְּתוֹכָם סָבִיב:
(לד) פְּעֻמוֹ זָהָב וְרִמּוֹן פְּעֻמוֹ זָהָב וְרִמּוֹן עַל שׁוּלְיוֹ הַמְּעִיל סָבִיב:

Thus we have mixed together a symbol of fullness – the pomengrant – and a symbol of emptiness – the bells. The Ishbitzer teaches the bells means we should be open to God, empty, ready to receive the divine – the pomengranties that we should be filled with human experience through which to accept the divine.

Carrying that a step further, I want to suggest that we are empty and full at the wrong times. Rather than engage in the difficult process of self-discovery, of change, its easier to self medicate and create a feeling of fullness that only masks our spiritual emptiness.

We pursue success because it validates us in the eyes of others, making us seemingly full. Yet when we allow outward measures to determine our inner worth, we find ourselves empty. Thus cheating can flourish in a school as close to home as Gunn or Paly. Is it any surprise that cheating is so much greater today? Children are told that the grade matters rather than the effort and so they cheat and create within themselves an inner emptiness. Is it any surprise that companies sometimes have creative accounting to show off their bottom line? After all, it's the bottom line that matters when I am an empty suit of armor.

But I am more than my outward success. And as much as I want to please everyone, I can realize in myself that doing the right thing fills me up in a more lasting way.

Food also becomes a kind of medication. If I am tired, stressed, feeling external pressure – eating creates a physical fullness that for a time can mask my internal emptiness.

The internet can be a modern medication as we click our lives away, creating social networks on places like Facebook where we present a stylized view of our selves, insulated in our armor from our failing and our vulnerabilities. What is it that drives us to

check our email again and again? When do we ask ourselves why are we doing this?

Because then in the morning we just feel ill and as empty inside as we ever have. We log off – and we are still alone. We keep looking at email as if we will find our self worth in our inbox.

If we allow the cycle to repeat, we need more and more to create that feeling. The emptiness inside becomes greater and greater and what is needed to fill it heavier and heavier.

Rosh Hashanah is asking us to begin taking off that armor. To allow ourselves to discover again who am I – what is that person within. Soloveitchik talks about this process when he says, “With the redemptive daybreak of a new “I” identity, Adam the second is ushered into a world of diversity and change where the feeling of insecurity expresses itself in the fact that the term “man” clothes a wondrous unique and incommunicable reality, in the gazing into somebody who returns one’s gaze suspiciously in watching and being watched in bewilderment.”

When we take off our character armor, when we are exposed to the world, it is frightening. It is an admission of need, an emptiness that cannot be filled from my own resources. We don’t like to do this much today. Yet it is an essential step for self knowledge. We can never grow as people until we admit who we are.

So most fundamentally, we are closed to the process of self-discovery. We don’t want to really confront who we are and then we find ourselves trapped in a process with ever increasing price. An armor that becomes ever heavier and weightier. This process finally fells Javert, the police officer pursuing Jon Valjean through the years as he realizes how good and moral a person Jon Valjean is:

And must I now begin to doubt,
Who never doubted all these years?...
That granting me my life today
This man has killed me even so?

...I'll escape now from the world
From the world of Jean Valjean.
There is nowhere I can turn
There is no way to go on...

And Javert commits suicide

4. Our choice is different

We, however, can confront that inner emptiness and find the resources to allow ourselves to discover that person who is changed, who rises to Maimonides challenge and find herself transformed.

Soloveitchik tells us that we need covenantal community – we need a supportive group of people willing to listen rather to judge, to share rather than to hide. I believe KE is such a community.

Yet once we have that community, we need to find the means for that difficult process of inner change and self-discovery. Fortunately, the words are close and at hand.

Byado apkid ruchie. Into God's hands I commit my spirit. I realize that I am incomplete, unsure. Afraid. I know that sometimes I am empty. And so in my incompleteness, in my admission that I am imperfect, flawed, I turn towards God in faith. Not to fill me up – but to acknowledge that I am sometimes empty.

One prayer I have begun to say to helps me in this process of self discovery, of realizing who I can be. Its is close and at hand – part

of the regular Shabbat morning prayers that I say every week. It comes in the section we often sing.

V'sabeynu mituvekha – that when I find myself compelled to eat not because I am hungry but because I am nervous, stressed or worried – that I can be sustained from God's goodness. Its not food that makes me fill full – its letting myself dwell with God.

V'samkheyenu b'yishuatekhah – when I am tempted to give into other failings, whether to gossip, that I can rejoice instead in God. That when I am tempted to watch TV just because its on, to self-medicate against the anxieties and fears of my own self, to insulate myself from looking inside my character armor, I can remind myself that it is God who nourishes and provides – that there can be joy in self-discovery.

And all this together – v'thair libeynu – this gradual process of removing my character armor, of discovering who I am and who I can be, purifies my heart to serve God. This mirrors the self-destructive cycle now in a positive feedback loop. Its true that averah gorret averah – but also mitzvah gorret mitzvah.

Its RH today. RH invites in the presence of supportive real community, with a depth of liturgy in front of us, to begin this process of teshuvah, of self-discovery. We have a hard task in front of us, but we can do it together. I need your help to change, to grow, to confront the existential terror of revealing myself with all my limitations and flaws even though I know I have to in order to change.

5. Conclusion

The Torah speaks of our failings as nasah avono – we lift up our sins. They are heavy, they bear us down. As the years go by, we add new plates, gloves and grieves, and slowly weigh ourselves

down. RH is a promise – a promise that we can take off that weight and discover ourselves anew. That sometimes accepting the burden of our choices becomes paradoxically a relief, a discovery that now at last I know who I am.

Yehi Ratzon...This year grant us all the strength to engage in the work that leads us to fulfill our prayer to you that we find satisfaction in Your goodness, that we rejoice in Your salvation as you fill us up with meaning, and therefore purify our hearts over these ten days of repentance to serve you in Truth.