

A Rebbetzin's Disclaimer

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FOR GOOD

A while back when Lior was 5, I had busted a favorite pen and I exclaimed, "Oh no—I broke my pen for good!" Lior countered with "Why'd you break it for good?" "Well, I didn't mean to—it just broke apart..." "Why'd you break it for good?" he repeated. Now I'm getting just a tad annoyed. I was pretty sure I just answered that. Why *for good*? he insisted. And then I got it – for him what could have possibly been *good* about my pen breaking? He had no context to understand that "for good" could also mean "permanently." (Aug 2009)

Clearly *he* didn't know that "good" had another meaning, but the thing is, neither did *I*. I mean, sure, I was using the word "good" correctly, but I did so without a conscious awareness of how differently it could be heard. With a 5-yr-old, it's reasonable to expect such miscommunication. Yet, the more I thought about it, the more I became aware that we make the unreasonable assumption that we're communicating clearly quite often. And what gets in the way? The basic building blocks of oral (and written) communication – words.

This time around, there's a passage that caught my attention that speaks to this unconscious relationship we have with words. Verse 30:14 begins: "*Ki karov aylecha haDAVAR m'od b'Ficha....*" "*The thing is very close to you, [it's] in your mouth....* Here, Moses is offering up a pep talk, letting us know that what's being asked of us is really familiar—and therefore eminently doable. But with a little shift of translation, I read it differently. "Davar" translated as "thing" also means "word." And, in Hebrew, when you know something "by mouth" you know it "ba'al peh"—

the idiom meaning “by heart.” Tweaking the translation accordingly, it now reads: “The WORD is very close to you—you know it by heart.”

So I began thinking that when something is so close, it can get in the way of our seeing it clearly. And with words—ones that are so familiar (like “good”) it’s easy to take for granted and make assumptions that we don’t even know we’re making.

GOD

Take GOD, for instance--the Mother of all semantic confusion. Do we really have any idea what that word means? Which concept is one speaking about? The Sunday School old white-bearded guy in the sky God? God as Know-It-All? God as Compassionate Father? As Wicked Witch? Motherly Shechinah? As Wizardly Great & Powerful El Shadai? You get the idea. The list, of course is endless. God’s multipersonalities could make a great after-school TV melodrama.

And then there are the modern God-substitute words like:” the Star Wars version- God starring as “The Force”. How about: Awareness, Consciousness, Light, Spirit, Essence, Life Force, Looooove. Hmmm. Let’s see if that works as a substitute (I paraphrase): “LOVE SMOTE a whole bunch of people who pissed It off.”

The point is, the word “God” is so rife with individual meaning and endless assumption, it’s a rather useless word, if one wants to communicate anything meaningful. It seems to me that if *anything* is clear about the word “God”, it’s only that it’s clearly unclear.

Let’s counter the hopeless God confusion with a Yom Kippur word that’s very close to us indeed: SIN – “cheyt” in Hebrew.

SIN

By now, most of us have now heard the rabbi talk about how the origin of the Hebrew stems from an old archery term which means “to miss the mark” or “to go astray”. Of course, that shifts our understanding completely—away from the normally assumed definition of sin as immoral act or egregious wrongdoing. This amended translation drops the implied moral judgment, suggesting a course correction instead.

But that’s not all! We Jews get sin-specific! “Sin”-related words in Hebrew abound. According to one source, in Torah there are 3 verbs and 6 different nouns—that describe “sin” —each with their own nuance. Among them – *aveirah*—regular old transgression, *pesha* – a deliberately defiant sin, and *avon*- a sin of lust. Sin is to us like snow to the Eskimo. What **does** that say about us?! (No wonder “Jewish Guilt” is so pervasive!)

HERO

Returning to words and where we've gone astray.....I've been thinking about a word that for years now we've been using so carelessly that its true meaning has been all but eviscerated.

Any guesses?I'm speaking of the word "hero." Appreciating true heroism is critically instructive in the art of being human—we need it for our well-being. It points to something greater than our mundane concerns—inspires awe and humility—appropriate to this Day of Atonement. What happens when we lose the sense of what words are to point to?

Here's another instructive Lior vignette. When he was 3, as I was putting him to sleep, he leans over and gives me a huge hug and kiss and exclaims: "Mommy, you're my best friend." Awww..... What more could a mother want to hear? These are the moments we live for.but then...He went on: "And Ori is my best friend and Shuli is my best friend, and Josh, and Heather is my most best friend....!!"

See what I mean? It's the same for "heroic". When everything is rendered "heroic" then, effectively, nothing is. We cheapen its meaning until it becomes entirely unrecognizable. We miss out on the reflection in the outer world of the best of human potential that lives inside of us.

So what specifically am I talking about?; how do we define "hero" these days? Well, when we speak of heroes, sometimes what we *really* mean are role models—folks whose skill or talent or fame we laud: especially celebrities and athletes. This is indicative of what we, as a society, value but has nothing remotely to do with that which is truly heroic. Here are a few references where I saw other aberrant concepts of "hero" show up:

First we have the American Humane Association Hero Dog Awards and the way they define heroics. They recognize dogs who provide any number of supportive services or (and I quote) "just greeting us with a wagging tail at the end of a hard day." Heroic indeed.

Then there's American Public Media's Budget Hero—a budget-balancing simulator game, Student Loan Hero—a loan management program, and then a fitness website that encourages folks to "Become a Hero!" "As a Hero" (capital H), they say, "you'll be able to challenge anyone on the site to a one-on-one fight for supremacy." Or anyone out there remember Guitar Hero? —popular guitar simulation video game. A few years ago Entertainment Weekly's "best-of" list had this to say about it: "An addictive videogame [that] provides the illusion of musical mastery for even the *least* gifted:. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Tap, tap, tap." Um.....,

heroic? But wait! It gets increasingly absurd. Really. We have www.beheroic.com. The tag line of their video describes what they're about: "Connect with friends, share recommendations and discover the best local services! That's heroic!" No....no it's *not*.

And this last one entertains me as much as it disturbs me. The Washington State Dept of Transportation has a "hero" program. Did you know this? Do you pay attention to these signs on the road— Dial 764-HERO? And what precisely defines a hero for them? I'll spare you the call. If you call after hours, this is what you'll hear: ("to report an HOV-lane violator press 1...to report a ferry line-cutter, press 3....) Heroism reduced to tattle-tailing! I think we've hit rock bottom folks!

TRUE HEROISM

How about this instead? I choose one person whose exemplary heroism impacted the Jewish story and in turn the greater human story as an illustration: Miep Gies, a Catholic woman who died a few years ago at age 100, was one of the 6 people who risked their own lives daily for over two years to hide Anne Frank and her family in the attic in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam during WWII. Whenever interviewed about that time, she'd insist: "I don't want to be considered a hero...Imagine young people would grow up with the feeling that you have to be a hero to do your human duty. I am afraid nobody would ever help other people, because who is a hero? I was not. I was just an ordinary housewife and secretary."

Humbling and awe-inspiring, is it not? And yet, it is the truly heroic who see their heroism simply as an expression of their humanity – nothing less, nothing more.

Along with Miep Gies' example, in the spirit of *tshuvah*, I'd like to take a stab at *returning* "heroism" to its rightful meaning. Umberto Eco offers the best description of heroism that I've come across. It has always resonated with me.:

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"Real heroes, those who sacrifice themselves for the collective good....are always people who act reluctantly.Real heroes are always impelled by circumstances; they never choose because, if they could, they would choose not to be heroes. The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else....he, the man worthy of esteem, was only a poor creature who reacted with dignity and courage in an event bigger than he was." (pp. 122-123 *Travels in Hyperreality*).

COURAGEOUS STANCE

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Yet what is it that we recommit to every year on this day? Although the “dignity and courage” of the hero can and ought to inform our way, it is **not** heroics that are asked of *us*. We just read that it’s not beyond our reach—does not require special abilities or superpowers. In fact, “...*karov aylecha hadavar m’od...*” It’s closer than you know!... *”b’ficha..... la’asoto.”* “You know it by heart.....to do it.” To do what exactly? The key is the word that gives this parashah its name: “*nitzavim.*” “*Atem nitzavim hayom*” “You are STANDING here today...Again, the nuance of the word is everything. *Nitzav* is a certain *kind* of standing – a resolute stance, also understood as “taking a stand”. But the text tempers this potential ego grab by adding a heart connection “.....*vil’vavcha la’asoto.*” It’s “in your heart to do it.” I take this to mean that we are asked to access the core (from the Latin “*cor*” meaning “heart”) of our being to embody **courageous** stance (“courage” also comes from that same “heart” root). Find your truth and live from it.

NICE

I don’t know that courageous stance is ever really easy, but I do think we make it much harder than it has to be. I have a thought as to why this is so. It seems to me that fear has put in place a cultural taboo against any kind of confrontation, opting for a culturally sanctioned superficiality that keeps things..... “nice.” “Nice” is “nice,” I suppose. But there is a hidden price to pay. It encourages fake sentiment, steeping our being in inauthenticity until we don’t even know where to look for ourselves anymore. Here’s a telling case in point:

I was just reading about a sociological study of flight attendants done about a decade ago. It found there was an enormous emotional toll associated with being nice all the time. [Some of us wouldn’t know....] Being constantly polite can cause the emotional equivalent of repetitive stress injury. The attendants were so “nice”-habituated that some had trouble turning it off. When this happened they became disconnected from their true emotions. This is not really surprising, is it?

When we operate from that place of tacit conformity to societal rules of engagement – when we’re convinced that the status quo ought to be maintained at virtually all costs, the voice of our Higher Self eludes us. We staunch its flow by ignoring it. So how might we coax it back?

Look, to take up courageous stance requires facing our fears. Unlike the hero, typically we are not called upon to risk life, limb or even livelihood. Compared to them *we* take on relatively benign risk: embarrassment, rejection, maybe ridicule. Is the avoidance of these discomforts really more important to us than acting in accord with our vision of our best selves? Do

we choose to be smaller than them? When we can see it from this perspective, is there *really* any choice? If playing it safe wins out, *truly* we lose.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Dag Hammarskjold put it this way: “It is when we all play safe that we create a world of utmost insecurity. It is when we all play safe that fatality will lead us to our doom.” Because this kind of “playing it safe” leaves space for the likes of, say, the Penn State child abuse scandal. He goes on: “It is in the “dark shade of courage” alone that the spell can be broken.”

COMFORTABLE DISCOMFORT

I’ve said it before and I’ll undoubtedly say it again. I believe that the art of living an authentic life demands a living paradox—namely: get comfortable being uncomfortable. “Amy,” you ask, how might one go about this? As a matter of fact, I have a couple of thoughts on that very subject.

Number one: Practice making a fool out of yourself. This first idea is borrowed from a therapy used to counter social anxiety called “constructive embarrassment.” It consists of behaving in a ridiculous manner in the public sphere on purpose. (Some of us have a knack for doing it more naturally than others!) A classic example is to turn and face everyone on an elevator instead of facing front. (For extra credit, make eye contact.) (Highly recommended, if you’ve never tried it before!) It builds a kind of muscle that otherwise seems to lie dormant in many of us. In this way, you build up your discomfort tolerance.

And when you’ve had some experience with that one, here’s the second related practice custom made-up by me. This one comes kind of naturally to me – you may want to use it with caution. Here it is: breathe in rainbows and butterflies..... Oh, come on – you know (me) better than that....! But seriously....here’s my suggestion for those of you who could use it: practice pissing people off. I don’t mean gratuitous malice—I just mean consider saying what you mean – censor yourself a little less, tell your truth a bit more. Consider stepping into a willingness to allow for disagreement, maybe even upset. See what happens. Practice until it comes naturally – comfortably uncomfortable.

The upshot of such exercises is that one finds oneself naturally building up a sort of immune system—just like allergy shots desensitize the body, so too can these practices desensitize the psyche. The result is one can begin to face stimuli that were previously overwhelming. We learn to just be with it without having to freak out about it. And here’s the kicker. It

comes with a secret surprise bonus: It's shockingly freeing when you get a feel for being comfortable with discomfort.

And then, to "*nitzav*"—whatever that means to you-- gets easier. Then one can take a firm stand, but without so much rigidity. The image of an earthquake-proof building came to me as I was thinking about this. If you were downtown and caught in the Nisqually quake of 2001 (but probably not 9-months pregnant, like I was), you know exactly what I'm talking about. The top floors of the skyscraper swayed back and forth. Somehow the building stood its ground, while also allowing *for give*—flexible enough to allow the impact to move through. This is the kind play I think is required if we are to be available to align ourselves with our highest knowing within.

TRY IT OUT

And if you're still listening to me, I'll tell you what any legitimate advocate of such things will tell you: "Don't listen to me." Check it out for yourself—in your own experience. So I invite you to listen in and see if you can connect with your own felt sense of "*nitzav*" Perhaps relax a bit more in your chair. (Or alternatively, sit more erect in your chair.) Close your eyes if you choose.

MEDITATION

As you move beyond the limitations of *d'varim* – of words, stopping in this moment to listen in to that which is "karov aylecha m'od" – impossibly close -- closer than your own breath – see if you can sense into that *nitzav* space inside yourself where courage moves from.

Allow it to expand.

(as you come back here....)

It is my wish on this Day of Awe—that in the coming year, each of us remains in touch with our inner Knowing, such that we will continually find within ourselves the strength to *nitzav* by living into that "dark shade of courage," thereby bringing forth the full integrity of our Being.

For Good.