



Shabbat Shuvah - Parashat Ha'azinu, Sept. 23, 2023

Lori Gilman

Shabbat shalom! My name is Lori Gilman.

I want to welcome everyone who is here today (and those watching on the livestream) to help celebrate the aufruf of our son, Noah, and his fiancée, Léa Toubiana, whose wedding will take place next month in Paris.

At this moment we are in a liminal time, an auspicious time, a time full of potential, a time in-between, a threshold.

Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the special shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is opened and we enter a period of waiting. It is a period of uncertainty, yet it is also a time when we have the opportunity to make teshuvah and to gain forgiveness, a period of introspection, and transformation. This is a special time to think about the people we are now and the people we would like to be.

In Judaism we continually sanctify times and places like these liminal moments and spaces and give them meaning. With the mezuzah we sanctify the liminal space between the inside and outside of our homes. By lighting the candles we sanctify the liminal moments when day meets night and when profane time meets holy time. At a bar or bat mitzvah we sanctify the time between childhood and adulthood. At a funeral we mark the time between life and death.

And, at a wedding we sanctify the moment between being a single person and being part of a couple. At all these in-between, and sometimes frightening, places and times, we need/want God to be with us, and through our rituals we acknowledge God's presence and seek God's comfort.

So given this commonality regarding liminal moments, it makes sense that Jewish traditions link weddings to the High Holiday season. God is considered the groom, the Jewish people the bride. The Jewish people appeal to God throughout the month of Elul, then on Rosh Hashanah, God proposes. The sounding of the shofar is our acceptance. Yom Kippur itself is the equivalent of the wedding. The Mishna ([Ta'anit 26b](#)) notes that Yom Kippur is the happiest day of the year because it celebrates the marriage between God and God's chosen people.

It's no coincidence, then, that this same Mishna informs us that single women of Jerusalem would go dance in the vineyards on Yom Kippur afternoons, giving them the chance to meet young men to marry.

The analogy works in the opposite direction, as well. Weddings take on some of the aspects of Yom Kippur. For example, the Talmud states that the bride and groom's sins are forgiven on their wedding day, as they are on Yom Kippur. The wedding day is like a couple's personal Yom Kippur.

Some Yom Kippur customs at weddings include the bride and groom fasting before the wedding ceremony and their saying the Anenu, Vidui and Al Chet prayers (that is the prayers of atonement, confession, and asking God for forgiveness, that we say on Yom Kippur). Other Yom Kippur customs at weddings include the wearing of white, and the *chatan* wearing a *kittel* under the chuppah. This way the couple can enter into their marriage, this new stage of life, pure and clean of all sins, just like we all do at the new year.

The joy of a bride and groom is said to be similar to the joy at the conclusion of Yom Kippur just before the blowing of the shofar.

It is not coincidental that we end Yom Kippur with the plea,

לשנה הבאה בירושלים

"Next year in Jerusalem," and end each wedding with the breaking of the glass, as we remind ourselves of the work we must do to help rebuild Jerusalem.

The requirements for a good, lasting marriage are similar to the requirements for continuous improvement in our relationship with God.

During this liminal time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur all of us have three things we are told to do to merit being written into the Book of Life and to sustain our relationship with God: *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. Repentance, prayer, and charity (righteous deeds).

To maintain one's relationship with a spouse, Rabbi Abraham Twerski puts it in a similar way. He suggests that there are only three phrases necessary in marriage:

1. Thank you (that's the tefillah part).
2. I'm sorry (that's the teshuvah part).
3. I admire you (that's the tzedakah part).

The primary act at this special time of year is *teshuvah*, repentance, as noted at the beginning of today's haftarah,

שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have fallen because of your sin." We are called to turn from sin and are given a promise from God of healing, sustenance, and Divine mercy.

The goal of teshuvah is for a person to set aside their previous negative habits and transform themselves into a new, better person. Anyone who has been married or in any close relationship knows how necessary it is to apologize when in the wrong and to try to change certain behaviors and speech.

But is the deep, existential change required by Yom Kippur really possible?

I was struck by a scene in the very last episode of *Ted Lasso*, where Roy Kent, a rather surly British soccer coach, opens up to his male co-workers, the Diamond Dogs, and complains, “During the past year I have been trying to change, but I’m still me. I want to be someone better.” Then he asks, “Can people change?”

He was given several answers (some better than others):

1. Learn to accept who you’ve always been.
2. You can change for the worse or better.
3. Change isn’t about trying to be perfect—perfection sucks.
4. You can’t get perfection. The best you can do is ask for help and accept it when you can and to always be moving forward.

Brett Goldstein (who plays Roy Kent) says in an interview that the premise of the entire show, *Ted Lasso*, is about people trying to be better. What he likes about the show is that everyone, to varying degrees, is better by the end than they were at the beginning, and that everyone is still trying to improve.

Going back to the Torah, we are given the example of Judah who was able to transform from being a man willing to sell his brother Joseph as a slave, to later becoming the man willing to spend the rest of his life as a slave so that his brother Benjamin could go free.

The heart of teshuvah is the belief that we can change. We are not destined to be forever what we were. Moving forward is what this period of atonement is about.

Teshuvah lets us choose who we want to be.

Tefillah, prayer, is the act of being in conversation with God. This can also be a transformative experience. To quote Rabbi Sacks: “Our prayers have been constructed by generation after generation of our ancestors as they searched for the words that would best express their collective thanks to Heaven and their hopes for Heaven’s grace. God listens, cares, loves, and forgives.”

As a recent article in the New York Times explains, “Gratitude is a positive emotion that can arise when you acknowledge that you have goodness in your life and that other people — or higher powers, if you believe in them — have helped you achieve that goodness.” But “feeling it is only half the equation,” the article continues.

Expressing gratitude is equally important to reap the benefits of this emotion. Studies show that gratitude provides mental health benefits — reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, increasing self-esteem and improving satisfaction with daily life.

When it comes to marriage, it goes without saying that gratitude, saying “Thank you,” often and not taking your spouse for granted is critical!

The third thing we are told to pursue, *Tzedakah*, is about what we do for other people. To illustrate, I’ll quote another example from Rabbi Sacks: “There is a strange feature of the geography of the Holy Land. Israel contains two seas: the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The Galilee is full of life: fish, birds, vegetation. The Dead Sea contains no life at all. Yet they are both fed by the same river, the Jordan. The difference is that the Sea of Galilee receives water at one end and gives out water at the other. The Dead Sea receives but *does not give*. The Jordan ends there. To receive without reciprocating is a kind of death. To live is to give.”

Giving unconditional love, giving time, doing small acts of kindness, expressing affection, grace, and forgiveness. All these are important in a marriage. Marriage is said to be a “give and give” relationship, rather than a “give and take” one.

Teshuvah, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah* may not change what happens to us, rather, the hope is that they will change us. Judaism teaches humility, thankfulness, and compassion, but we don’t always live up to those ideals. We are given these ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to focus on how we can move forward, recognizing that we will never be perfect (after all, perfection sucks!). It is a time to mend broken relationships with people and with God.

As we look forward to Yom Kippur, and Noah and Léa look forward to their wedding, we recognize that these are both times to come to terms with who we are, what kind of person (or partner) we want to be, and what we have to do to get there. Just as a wedding gives the bride and groom an opportunity to turn over a new leaf and start a new life together; this liminal time before Yom Kippur can prompt us all to get a fresh start.

As a bride and groom declare their love for each other at their wedding, on Yom Kippur, we, the Jewish people, declare our love for God, asking for forgiveness from God, and thanking God, knowing that in return God loves and forgives us.

Shabbat shalom, G’mar Chatima Tova, and Mazal Tov!