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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

Change We Can Believe In

by Aliza Sperling

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The High Holiday period is punctuated with the theme of change. But how many times can we hear about change during the High Holidays without becoming cynical? For many of us, little has changed since last year. Many of the problems we face have not gone away—or may have even gotten worse. Our relationships, our communities, and the world around us have not appreciably changed for the better. Is it possible to break free of our stasis and change the problems that plague us? How can we make this Yom Kippur different, and truly grow and change over the course of the coming year?

A key to this question may lie in a biblical story that we all know so well we hardly give it a second thought: the story of Moshe and the burning bush. When Moshe stops to consider why the bush is burning but not consumed, God reveals the divine name Ehyeh, and announces that this force will redeem the people from slavery.

Rav Hirsch explains that the name Ehyeh expresses God's absolute freedom—and the name itself empowers humans:

All other creatures are that which they have to be...[but God] alone can say..."I shall be that which I wish to be." This expresses the personal, absolute free nature of God. . . . The future is completely unbound, completely dependent on [God's] free will. . . . [This name] breaks the chain of every other power, sets [Humanity] upright and free in the service of God.²

The name Ehyeh symbolizes God's radical freedom: God is a force beyond nature, time, and human assumptions about the world. When God brings this liberating power into history, everything changes. A bush can defy nature and

burn without being consumed. A slave nation can free itself spectacularly from the most powerful nation on earth. Our world no longer must be constrained by the laws and expectations that we believe imprison us; there are possibilities and freedoms open to us if only we would free our minds to see them.

In our personal lives, as well, new possibilities emerge. Instead of believing that we are branded permanently by previous actions, we can transcend our misdeeds through teshuvah, repentance, and grow and change to become different people. We have the radical ability to free ourselves from who we are and transform into the people we want to be.

The importance—and difficulty—of freeing ourselves to change and live up to our potential is illustrated by the story of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish (BT Bava Metzria 84a):

יומא חד הוה קא סחי ר' יוחנן בירדנא חזייה ריש לקיש
ושוור לירדנא אבתריה אמר ליה חילך לאורייתא אמר ליה
שופרך לנשי א"ל אי הדרת בך יהיבנא לך אחותי דשפירא
מינאי קביל עליה בעי למיהדר לאתויי מאניה ולא מצי הדר
אקרייה ואתנייה ושויה גברא רבא

One day R. Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan, when Resh Lakish saw him and leaped into the Jordan after him.

R. Yochanan said to him, "Your strength should be for the Torah!" "Your beauty," Reish Lakish replied, "should be for women." "If you will return to Torah," said Rabbi Yochanan, "I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I." Reish Lakish accepted this offer. . . . Subsequently, Rabbi Yochanan taught him Bible and Mishnah, and made him into a great man.³

The midrash starts off entertainingly as the handsome Rabbi Yochanan and the well-known bandit Reish Lakish meet in the Jordan River. Each man immediately sees in the other the potential for his own line of work. Rabbi Yochanan tells Reish Lakish to use his strength to become a Torah scholar. Reish Lakish in turn

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² S.R. Hirsch, *The Pentateuch, Translated and Explained*, tr. I. Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989), pp. 31, 33.

³ Adapted from the Soncino translation of the Talmud, <http://halakhah.com/babamezia/index.html>

tells Rabbi Yochanan that he should use his good looks to attract women. Both men have the ability to see the other (but not the sister) as they are at the moment, as well as the potential of what they can become. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they meet in the river, a symbol of movement and flow. In a true act of strength, Reish Lakish agrees to change his life and becomes a great Torah scholar.

The story then continues to describe a halakhic argument between these two men, which occurs long after Reish Lakish's days as a bandit. The two men are debating the point at which weapons are completed and therefore susceptible to ritual impurity. Rabbi Yochanan argues that a weapon is completed when it is forged in fire. Reish Lakish argues that a weapon is not considered complete until a later stage of the process: when it is rinsed in water. While the surface argument centers on weapons, in fact this halakhic argument goes to the heart of their relationship. At what point is a person complete? Is the way we are the way we will always be, or can we say that people have real potential to continue to grow, develop, and change?

Rabbi Yochanan responds to Reish Lakish's halakhic point with a comment that references Reish Lakish's earlier life: "The bandit knows his trade." Reish Lakish, who thought he had put that life behind him, suddenly suspects that his hard work to become a "great man" has not changed the way Rabbi Yochanan perceives him. He questions whether Rabbi Yochanan's intervention in his life has benefited him

After this exchange, Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish's relationship shatters—as does each man individually. Rabbi Yochanan becomes depressed, and Reish Lakish falls sick and dies. In order to comfort Rabbi Yochanan, the rabbis send Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat to become his study partner. Rabbi Elazar is the opposite of Reish Lakish: he supports everything Rabbi Yochanan says, instead of challenging him as a rival. Rabbi

Yochanan, who thrives in a world of challenge and growth, is inconsolable when he realizes that the only person capable of helping him move forward is gone. Perhaps this stasis in the Beit Midrash also causes him to regret the static, inflexible, person he appears to be during and after his altercation with Reish Lakish. He cries out until he loses his mind, and dies.

When Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan first meet in the Jordan River, they are exuberantly alive, able to perceive the potential in each other. At the end of the story, though, they have caused each other's demise. Rabbi Yochanan initially challenged Reish Lakish to change and grow, and Reish Lakish became an exciting learning partner for him. But when Rabbi Yochanan is vulnerable—when he is seriously challenged in debate or when he feels that Reish Lakish does not appreciate him—he views Reish Lakish as a threat rather than a partner. Both men become frozen in their positions, unable to find a way forward. Their deaths are really only a reflection of the stasis from which they are unable to emerge.

The story of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish is a sobering counterpoint to the hopeful message at the burning bush. But we can learn from this cautionary tale important lessons on how to achieve the promise of freedom and potential that God presents to Moshe:

- **Pursue potential:** The story of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish shows the possibility of pushing ourselves to become someone new and to create a new trajectory in our lives. Reish Lakish changes his life in response to Rabbi Yochanan's intervention and becomes a great man. We, too, should embrace opportunities to grow and change.

- **See ourselves and others for who we are *now*:** Reish Lakish is cut to the quick when Rabbi Yochanan calls him a bandit, and responds by questioning whether his transformation was worthwhile. Doubt and

cynicism can destroy years of hard work. We need to give ourselves and others the freedom to change and grow. Furthermore, when we interact with others, we need to see the people they are *now* and resist the temptation to view them as they used to be.

- **Embrace challenges:** Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish pushed each other in the Bet Midrash and in their personal lives. When they responded positively to the challenge, they became better people and Torah scholars. When they treated the challenges as threats, their relationship collapsed. Challenges, or challenging people, may not always seem like gifts, but they help us grow. We should surround ourselves with people who challenge us positively—and welcome their challenges as growth opportunities.

God's revelation at the burning bush presents us with a divine imperative: to transcend the limitations that we believe fetter us and to become truly free. We lose out when we ignore this idea and assume that the status quo is our only realistic option. Certainly, making the decision to deeply change course and pursue our true potential is scary; but as Rabbi Yochanan learns in the end, the alternative, leading a life without growth, is not worth living. This Yom Kippur, if we embrace the radical freedom that God has revealed to us, the change we can accomplish can truly be redemptive.

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