

KN 5785 - AN EMBLEM OF GOODNESS

A true story from 50 years ago. A young German idealist grew up determined *not* to be a Nazi. He'd been horrified by what his parents' generation had done. So he did all he could to not become at all like them. He eventually became part of liberation movements, and by the mid-1970s had become active in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. He then took part in the Entebbe hijacking in July of 1976. When he was separating the Jews from the rest of the passengers, a Holocaust survivor, noting his unmistakable accent, rolled up his sleeve to show his tattoo, saying "I'd thought we were done with this." He replied, "I am not a Nazi, I'm an idealist."

Over breakfast in Tel Aviv last February, when Debbie and I were told this story by our new friend Douglas, the message was clear: simply trying to be *against* becoming-something is woefully insufficient. This story proves it. It is, instead, necessary that you stand *for* something. Indeed, the *best* way to stand against, is by standing for. When you cling to something righteous, you spend a lot less effort struggling to keep from becoming something else.

This is such a vital Kol Nidre lesson, this year in particular. Because none of us knows where things are headed. But what we do need to know is where *we* are headed. And knowing we're going in the right direction. And this means knowing what we're for, what we're here to do. But that's not all. We'll also need to anticipate obstacles that will surely show up and hold us back. And finally, we could use clarity about what success will look and feel like.

First, What are we here to do? For me this year standing for reducing harm and redeeming hope, can be summarized in a Psalm that goes like this: Dear God, make me an emblem of Goodness עשה עמי אות לטובה (Ps. 86:17). It's what we, as Jews, not only stand for. It's what we're here for. It always has been. It always will be.

Of course generating goodness isn't as easy as it sounds. My friend Rabbi Benny Lau, who's morally handsome approach to teaching Jewish text has made him a leading rabbi in Israel, tells of a visit he made last November to one of Southern Israel's largest Bedouin towns, Rahat. I was

there 6 years ago to attend an inspiring graduation ceremony of Desert Stars, a terrific City-Year mentor program for Bedouin teens who need help grounding themselves and their future.

Benny went there to support the Bedouin community that was also hard-hit by October 7. At one point, he suggested they pray together. The head Sheik, among their all-Muslim community, invited Benny to go first. As Benny held in his heart all five of his kids who were then deep in Gaza in IDF reserve units, from where daily reports of soldiers falling in battle kept coming, Benny prayed: “May my kids have heavens help to make the world better by taking the terrorists out of the world.”

When he was done, the head Sheik spoke up. He respectfully replied, “If God listens to your prayer, my mother may die.” He explained that he himself grew up in Gaza and that his mother and many of his family members still live where he was raised. Benny was taken aback. But he listened. He did so tenderly, asking about the Sheik’s mother qualities about how she’s bearing up.

Benny’s story underscores how unsimple *standing for* being an *emblem of goodness* can often be. Even in a wicked vs. righteous battle. Even among people of good faith. After all, two of the Sheik’s family-members from Rahat were also murdered by Hamas on October 7th.

Setting a clear goal is not enough. You also needed flexibility, agility, and the readiness to adapt, to pivot in ways that are sincere and responsive.

And here’s the key: when something’s difficult, this is never a reason to not try. Quite the opposite, difficulty often corresponds to importance. This may have been a reason why that young German idealist ended up the very kind of person he sought to not be. Opposing, tearing down, comes a lot easier. Ironically, wielding a sledgehammer is a lighter lift than measured use of precision construction tools

We know this all too well because this season’s work, tonight’s work, is among the hardest work we do all year. Things hold us back. Even when we’re careful. And before we know it, a voice

inside us whispers words that fuel self-doubt based on past performance, remaking an obstacle into an impasse.

How then can we overcome self-doubt about our capacity to change? By reassuring ourselves, by not getting too down on ourselves.

Even though we pound our chests with regrets over our wrongs, even though we confess our failings, this isn't the only confession we've come across in recent weeks. Last month, we read of a confession in the Torah which always comes just weeks prior to Yom Kippur's confessions. It's a confession for all the good things you've done. "I have given to Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow as You've commanded me. I've neither sinned nor neglected your commandments" (Deut. 26:13). It comes as you bring the Tithe offering and it's purposefully there to remind you of what you actually do accomplish, the *emblem of goodness* you do live up to being more often than you notice.

Pick something. One behavior. One action. How you use your time. Or maybe to try beginning a testy conversation with a question rather than a claim.

Doing something is where our Psalm's plea begins: *make me* an emblem of goodness. The first Hebrew word, *Ase*, *make*, means to *do* something.

Here's one that I am going to work harder on this year. I want to think more highly of people. Yes, I do like to think this is something I try to practice. So many who make up our amazing KI family, that's each and every one of you, daily inspire me. I reliably walk out of meetings of a minyan with a spring in my step, with something I didn't bring. I can and do try to appreciate this when I recite my version of the Tithe confession's accomplishments.

But there are days when I'm down or having a particularly hard time with somebody. I go to darker places around motives and frustrations around entanglements that've tightened into hard-knots. I'd like to adopt a practice of trying to recall what's bringing them to where they are.

I like to preach the following: I don't have to justify every crazy idea out there, but it behooves me to try and understand what brings people to them. Often it's fear. Sometimes, it's having been wronged by reality. Other times, insecurity. I'd like to be able to offer, especially when I'm overtaken by prickly conflicts, a reminder that this same somebody is in fact so much better than that.

My favorite example of saying you're much better than that, comes from Elie Weisel's unforgettable rebuke of President Reagan on the eve of his visit to a cemetery where Waffen SS were buried. "That place is not your place" Weisel said as he looked the President in the eye at a White House ceremony. It was such a well chosen sentence. *Your place* meant you know better, you are better. You know it. We all do too.

When I can bring myself to generously convey a sentiment like that. You're so much better than that. You know it. I know it. Even better, your doing so is often reciprocated.

A second obstacle that stands in the way of your efforts to be a bit better is being a bit too bitter, or angry. As cunning as self-doubt can be, an average day includes more than a fair share of infuriating prompts.

Like being disciplined by a western world leader who demands that the IDF try harder to stop perpetrating indiscriminate harm. Or being assailed for not being more accommodating of those who keep trying to harm us, who keep proclaiming they'll do it as often as they can. Or, closer to a more daily pedestrian reality, it's the fire-hose of anger that gushes forth all the time. I recently asked someone who walks to work everyday, how often does she make her walk, without hearing a cyclist shouting at a motorist?

You might find it interesting that our Jewish tradition has a highly practical approach to managing your anger. Most things that get us angry can be traced back to our sense of self being insulted, belittled, or dismissed. Maybe it's someone we love, some cause that's dear to us. When such people or things get trampled, we fume. Here's the point: whenever I sit with someone

who's describing how mad something made them, I ask them to try and locate what part of *the me* was being trampled?

I described this to someone in our community this week. Then I added, it doesn't really help because anger should be felt, not bottled up or suppressed lest it explode later on. She said, "No, I think it *does* help. Because the next time I feel its rush, I may be able to contain it a bit better because its source will be familiar enough for me."

The 13th century sage, Nachmanides, wrote a letter of life-advice to his child. "Strive to contain your anger, because whenever you can, you reveal the quality of your humility." He doesn't say you reveal your calmer nature. He says your humility. Why? Because a well-integrated sense of self is less likely to seethe longer than is absolutely necessary.

This brings to mind a key phrase in our Psalm that hopes to make me an emblem of goodness. Earlier the passage asks for help to "piece-together my heart" יחד לבבי (Ps. 86:11). Sometimes we need to piece-together a heart, not just when it's been broken, but also when it's overheated. We ask God's help, a God who often is remembered for angry moments, but who actually forgives again and again. This by no means suggests we should. Often we shouldn't. But considering it can have a ventilating effect on us. Even if we get outside our own heads for an instant, like when you watch a spider lower itself on a thread, before the rest of the room comes back into focus, this is often enough of a pause for you to want to locate our rage enough for us to keep ourselves together, enough to piece-together our hearts.

We still have anger passing through us, as it occasionally should. But we're keeping ourselves from becoming totally defined as angry people.

This is so much easier said than done. But trying and sticking with it is necessary. Because the whole world feels coarse and cynical when slow-burn anger is like oxygen. But it doesn't have to. Indeed, the spirit of this most solemn of nights suggests we breathe a very different kind of air.

Here's how it can look and feel. Benny Lau's story from that November-visit to Rahat didn't *end* there. He kept the name of that Sheik's mother. And to this day, every Friday night, when Benny and his wife light candles, they say a special prayer for the health and well-being of his mother, often Facetiming but always sending a picture of their doing so. That's what *standing for*, with tender care, being an *emblem of goodness*, can look like.

Do something. This is how Israelis who continue to endure, trauma heaped upon trauma, are surviving . They are constantly doing... And this is what Benny did. And continues to do every single Friday night for almost a year now.

Speaking of doing something healing. This week, a group of IDF reservists arrived at a school in northern Israel and discovered, much to their astonishment, this date written on the board in one of the classrooms: 7th of Tishrei 5784—exactly one year ago that day. Next to the date, there was also a class assignment: “Choose one line from the Neilah (closing prayer of Yom Kippur) and write it down in your notebook.”

This homework assignment, of course, was never completed. This settlement and school were evacuated before it could be.

These reservists decided to complete the assignment themselves! Each one of them copied a line from Neilah into a notebook. They managed to obtain the phone number of the school principal and asked her if they could submit the homework to the teacher, a year late. They added their wish that she should be able to return to her classroom soon in peace.

The school principal, Sigal, was so touched by this gesture and sent the soldiers the following note: “Without knowing it, you have done something amazing. The teacher of this class, Zahava, retired this year, and you have now closed a circle for her. You have given her a beautiful retirement gift since we haven't yet returned to school. Thank you for fighting for us so that we will be able to come back to a secure home.” There have been countless more emotional responses from the staff, parents, and children at this school for this very special greeting from the soldiers before Yom Kippur.

One more line could be written in the notebook. We close the Neilah prayer with the verse, “Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem.” And this year we can add: Next year in a rebuilt Kibbutz Kfar Azza, Kiryat Shemona and in a rebuilt Israel.

I specify Kfar Azza, because we are honored this Yom Kippur to have, praying with us, four amazing residents of Kfar Azza. Vered, Aviv, Idan, and Uri Libstein. Their much beloved and revered husband and father, Ofir Libstein and their treasured son and brother Nitzan, were killed fighting back Hamas terrorists on the morning of October 7th. For those who may not know, Ofir was a hero of Israel, the leading champion for upbuilding the southern region of the Negev which he headed for years. I still remember Rotem Yadlin, Mayor of the Gezer Region, with tears in her eyes the instant she and all Mayors learned that Ofir had been killed. We’re deeply honor, dear Vered, and Uri, and Idan, and Aviv, to have you with us this Yom Kippur and we pray that your being here helps you in some way continue to honor Nitzan and Ofir’s all-too-short lives as you travel on RV here in the US this Fall.

Doing something, even something small, can lift you up and out of quicksand, depositing you on firmer ground. It literally gives landing gear to what you stand for.

Finally, How will we know when we’ve succeeded? 2 ways. First, we need to make a metric, a clearly defined moment each week when we see it and feel it.

I will play every Friday prior to Shabbat, considering whether I’ve succeeded that week in trying to remind somebody there’s so much better. Thus trying not just to bless the kindling the lights, but also to be a blessing by kindling light.

Second, we need to right-size the change we seek. Huge change is neither possible nor what we’re after tonight. Right-sized change is just a little bit. That’s all. And..that’s a lot. Because, being on the right path, heading in the right direction, is what our reunion with this book invites and encourages.

May we *stand for*, not merely stand against, in the year we've begun, with the wherewithal to overcome self-doubt, and contain anger.

Make me, dear God, an emblem of goodness. And may that be enough to inspire tender-goodness to radiate for a brighter, less bitter, more glowing and grateful year ahead. Amen