

The Nachshon Effect
Yom Kippur 5779
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Our tradition lifts up what we may call the Nachshon Effect. This is not a scientifically recognized term, but it is certainly and significantly spiritually motivated.

It takes us back to the Exodus, when the Israelites, newly freed from slavery but not yet wrapped in the arms of safety, stand in peril at the shores of the Sea. They are trapped between the approaching army of a regretful Pharaoh racing to recapture them and an open expanse of water.ⁱ Slavery does not include swim lessons, so they don't know how to swim. The rabbinic imagination some time around the 2nd century created a path for their redemption. In one story, it was not until a man named Nachshon stepped into the water and only then did the path open.ⁱⁱ But, there is another midrash that tells us that Nachshon stepped forward and jumped in to save his fellow drowning Israelites who had rushed forward into the water. Nachshon's example led others to follow, and it was only then that the waters parted. That is when the world changed. It took one soul to attract others.

The people, motivated by Nachshon, were awakened to their own sense of responsibility that they could help to rescue one another.

The Nachshon Effect. One person's action inspires others to join in.

This is the positive side of the story. Recently, I learned of a modern redemption story. A young man from Yemen named Mohammed Al Samawi escaped extreme danger and probable death and reached America because others far away took responsibility for his life.ⁱⁱⁱ Their actions say something fundamental about what about it means to be human. When acquaintances from the US and Israel stepped up to rescue a young man they hardly knew from the ravages of the war in Yemen, we should pay attention. And reflect.

Al Samawi grew up in a loving family with its own cultural complications. He was raised with a worldview just like the millions of others who surrounded him, the dislike of the unlike, a too familiar behavior worldwide.

Yemen has been caught up in a civil war for years. Al Samawi's own thoughts made him seek more information that led him to a job in a social relief NGO and to online interfaith dialogue groups, associations that led to death threats. Through his work, he had made contact with a host of individuals. But these were paper thin superficial connections and yet, he still reached out for help through social media to save his own life. Four individuals, a biotech consultant, a peace activist, a water researcher and a video games-for-peace entrepreneur--who did not know each other--responded to his social media pleas. Through a teeth clenching and nail biting series

of events, they helped him cross the Reed Sea to his liberation. The Passover story lives on.

But what if no one steps forward? What if the Nachshon effect is never activated?

We are all too familiar with the human capacity to turn away and ignore cries for help. The story of Kitty Genovese is a prime example of a case that captured a bleak communal inflection point on whether to take responsibility for one another, even when we don't know someone well or at all.

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered on her way home from work. Neighbors heard her cries, but did not act. Genovese's death might have been averted if someone had taken action. Though years later, they discovered some had made slight efforts by yelling out their window, no one ran to her rescue. In time, this awful example of inaction even acquired a name of its own, bringing forward the concept of the Bystander Effect, the recognition that the more people are thought to be present, the less chance there is that someone will respond. Researchers call it a diffusion of responsibility, since witnesses assume someone else will step up to assist.

Stories like Kitty Genovese's, but also that of Mohammed Al Samawi, cause us to search our souls to ask how might we have responded, how might we have stepped forward. Would we be willing to take action, to hold ourselves accountable in responsible ways?

What do we do when?

We hear yelling and throwing of things in the apartment next door?

Or a racist joke at a party?

Or a sexist response to a colleague?

We witness bullying on the internet?

And whole bunch of collusion and complicity?

Won't someone, anyone step forward? Won't someone else take care of it? Reveal it? Fix it?

It's like the old Yiddish story of the foreman on the jury who, when asked for the decision responds, "Your honor, we, the jury, with regard to this matter, have decided, we'd rather not get involved."

The phrase "if you see something, say something" rings true on many levels. And so does, if you see something or even you say something, then do something.

Whether or not Al Samawi or his rescuers realized it, their willingness to immerse themselves in the waters of his troubles redeemed them all.

Each year on Yom Kippur, we arrive at our own inflection points. How will this day, with the truth of our very human imperfection allow us to be pointed toward taking responsibility?

If someone who knew nothing about Judaism, picked up the Machzor they might well wonder what kind of people we are that we articulate our transgressions in such detail. We list them alphabetically in an acrostic and pound our hearts in remorse. We recite a litany of wrongdoing, repeating over and over again all that we have committed against God and one another.

Are we really that awful? A good appraisal of the confessions we offer during this Yom Kippur, this day of personal and communal reckoning makes all of us, every last one of us seem like we are not paying attention to anyone but our own selfish needs, or worse, are intentionally oblivious.

What kind of religious tradition is this to accentuate the negative so blatantly?

A wonderful tradition it turns out, but you know this already. We gather during this day not as a punishment, not as a demeaning rebuke to shame us, but rather to summon us to find our better selves.

We are not plagued by eternal damnation, but rather by the opportunity for renewal to repair, to correct, to make right. We start with those we have hurt or negatively affected, but at the same time we acknowledge that we stand before that Power, that Presence of the universe that is beyond us which is larger than we are as individuals--and also a part of us with which we must reckon. That is the One who holds a mirror up to our lives to admit who we really are and how we have acted or failed to act.

The early Chasidic masters thought of Yom Kippur as a day of joyous celebration. How great is it, they taught, that we get to make *t'shuvah*. We are able to right the wrongs with others and make amends toward our Creator. Amazing, they exclaimed.

When we finally arrive to N'ilah, the last part of Yom Kippur, we offer these words: *This is holy for God. Do not be sad for your rejoicing in the Holy One [and the opportunity for t'shuvah] is the source of your strength.*

The challenge is to make our way through the recognition and the realization of what it means to take responsibility for our lives and to demand it from those around us.

Let's say the obvious about this past year, which felt like the world and particularly, our country might consider a national pounding of our chests. Soul crushing actions whose destructive impact is immeasurable. Hollywood, Gymnastics, Governmental offices, Newsrooms, universities, and the now de-hallowed halls of some religious

institutions. For the sins, we have committed through collusion, complicity, duplicity, implication, connivance, deception, and many others. Here, there and everywhere. We are better than this.

It is time to explore what it means to be responsible, to claim culpability even when we might not have been directly involved. There is a book entitled, *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*. It could be a refrain from this year. How easy it is to point a finger out, as the saying goes, and to forget that there are three fingers pointing back at us, as the saying goes.

Years ago in Jerusalem, an ultra Orthodox mentally ill man freshly released from prison attended the Pride parade, the celebration of LGBTQ lives, with the expressed desire to cause harm. He most certainly did, killing 16 year old Shira Banki. At her funeral, a well known Israeli Orthodox rabbi Benny Lau, referenced a section of the Torah^{iv} that describes what to do if a corpse is found, but the identity of the killer is unknown. The elders of the nearest town perform a ritual and make this declaration: "Our hands did not spill this blood." But, Lau challenged that assertion that anyone might say: Our hands did not spill this blood. That would be impossible. Rabbi Lau said: "Anyone who ever sat at a Shabbat table, in a school classroom, in a synagogue, on a soccer field, at a club or community center, who heard those racist jokes, who heard those homophobic jokes, who heard the crude language and did not stand up to stop it, is an accomplice to this bloodshed. We've all heard it; there isn't anyone here who has not heard it...We must take responsibility."^v

WE must take RESPONSIBILITY.

On Yom Kippur, in ancient times when the Temple stood and the high priest entered the holy of holies to confess for the community, he offered only three words of contrition in Hebrew:

Chatanu, Aveenu, Pashnu^{vi}
We have missed the mark.
We have sinned.
We have done wrong.

If we don't name it, we can't correct it.

Those ancient admissions remain in our liturgy with the added insight:
For the sins we have committed against You
Knowingly or unknowingly-
Openly and Secretly
Under duress or by our own will

The litany of confession is long because the potential to abdicate our responsibility is always present. We may want to remove ourselves from sin, run away from it but confession calls us back. It summons us to face our true imperfections, to admit and

own them. We do so not as individuals but through public declarations of our wrongdoing because if one of us is responsible then we are all responsible. Einstein called it an optical delusion to think that we are separate from the rest of humanity. All of our actions are mystically intertwined.^{vii} Heschel declared: Some are guilty. All are responsible.

Such is the purpose of this day. While we grace this earth we need our confessions to place us within a greater whole as the constant reminder of past and future errors. We are human creatures with an ability to right a wrong and to abide by the ethical teaching our tradition provides as our compass on a path of true responsibility.

Our tradition teaches us that we can never escape from the responsibility demanded of each and every human being. The Hebrew word for responsibility is Achra'ut. The essence of its meaning contains the concept of "after" and "other"

Mussar^{viii}, Judaism's moral curriculum for the soul, teaches that the idea of "after" is about the consequence of our actions. We know that every action has a re-action. That is why the Mishnah^{ix} recognizes that finding the right path in life comes from those who are conscious of the consequences of their behavior. If we only reference ourselves and consider ourselves alone we have ignored others in the pathway of what we have done. We are better than that. As Mussar teaches, ego can commandeer our lives. Responsibility frees the grip of our ego from self-absorption.^x

As Rabbi Jonathan Saks recently wrote,^{xi} Without a deeply internalized sense of collective responsibility for the common good, society begins to fracture and fragment.

What we do to correct our flaws has consequences for others who follow after us. We will be their ancestors and they will look upon us and ask, why?

Responsibility has an intended consequence. It nourishes us and strengthens our inner life. The very act of turning toward another, of taking responsibility, and seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole elevates and lifts us to new spiritual planes.

Muhammed Al Samawi of Yemen and now America wrote a book of his passage to freedom. His story is soon to be released as a major motion picture. It should be. It remains a story of responsibility conducted by human beings striving to be their best selves. There was a moment in the plot when a helicopter might pick up Al Samawi, but it would cost 70 thousand dollars. One of his rescuers was asked if he would pay it but he paused knowing that he could help many more people with that amount of money than this one man stuck in Yemen. It was a moment of truth. By the time he decided to go ahead, that option had disappeared. These opportunities may not always be as dramatic as this one was, but we are presented with these

moments of truth all the time. Whether we are willing to see them as an opportune moment for sacred responsibility makes all the difference.

We can move through our lives with the optical delusion that our actions affect only ourselves or we can recognize that we are all part of an interconnected universe. We are only a small speck but with enormous potential for impact. Our future, our children's future, and that of the whole world depend on us rising to the highest level of our own humanity to be better and to strive to be better.

We are all Nachshon, one soul attracting others to engage, endowed, each of us, with the sacred gift to step up and to step in. And who knows, that very act, may even initiate a miraculous moment of redemption for us all.

ⁱ Exodus 14

ⁱⁱ Sotah 37a

ⁱⁱⁱ The Fox Hunt Mohammed Al Samawi

^{iv} Deuteronomy 21:7

^v <http://www.eshelonline.org/rav-benny-laus-speech-given-at-shira-bankis-jerusalem-memorial/>

^{vi} Mishnah Yoma 3:8

^{vii} Einstein and the Rabbi Rabbi Naomi Levy, page 358

^{viii} Everyday Holiness, Alan Moranis, page 97

^{ix} Pirkei Avot 2:9

^x Everyday Holiness, page 205

^{xi} The Jewish Chronicle, 9.7.18