

Return, Reboot, Reload

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In 1913, a 27 year old Jew, who had grown up in the home of totally assimilated, wealthy German parents, came to a Kol Nidre service in Berlin for what he thought would be his last time. He had decided to convert to Christianity. This service was to be his way of saying goodbye to Judaism. But something happened. That young man, Franz Rosenzweig, heard something or saw something or felt something or remembered something that led him to change his mind. He began to study Judaism seriously... including establishing with Martin Buber the Lehrhaus Judaica, a radical center for secular Jewish studies... and he became one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century.

Biographers and historians never could figure out exactly what happened that night to change his life. Maybe it was the Kol Nidre prayer itself. Probably not the words – the words don't really make sense. The words are a legal formula that release us from vows we haven't yet made. "All of our vows, all of our promises and obligations, from this Yom Kippur until next Yom Kippur -- they shall not be binding nor shall they have any power." It's counter-intuitive, almost fraudulent. No wonder the medieval rabbis tried to abolish it. So did the early leaders of the Reform Movement. But they couldn't. In fact the prayer is so deeply ingrained in our collective consciousness that the whole evening service is called by its name. And it is presented with great pomp and solemnity, as sacred theater: as though we were in a Jewish court, with people, holding Torah scrolls as witness to the legal proceedings where we are released from our vows. Traditionally the Kol Nidre is recited before dark because you can't conduct a courtroom hearing at night. That's why it is the only evening service where worshippers wear a tallit, a garment that is only worn during the day.

So what was it that made Rosenzweig wrestle with the meaning of his life, his purpose? If it were not the Kol Nidre itself, maybe for it was the intensity and power of contemplating his own death, which is the central point of Yom Kippur. Or maybe he felt in that haunting melody all the pain of generations of Jews before him who were pressured into giving up their Jewishness, against their wills.

Or maybe he sensed what I sensed as I stood before this Jewish court tonight. If my vows are no longer binding, if all the promises I have made are broken, then who am I? I'm no longer a wife, a mother, a daughter, a grandmother, a rabbi, a friend... no longer obligated to finish a project or to answer an email. No, I am simply be a naked soul. Standing in the presence of the Transcendent. The "me" I recognize is in ruins.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Larry Kushner, explains it this way: "Kol Nidre means: all bets are off. Hearing Kol Nidre is like the sound of flipping that silent software switch that anyone who has ever fiddled with a computer has discovered with relief and joy: 'restore default

configuration.’ Go back to zero. Clean slate. Fresh start. You see before you on the screen one simple question: ‘Begin new game?’”

Yes, you have screwed up this past year. Yes, you have work to do to heal the pain you have caused. Yes, Yom Kippur doesn’t atone for the sins you’ve committed against other people – you still have to repair those directly with them... But for promises made to yourself, promises made to God... clean slate; fresh start... an opportunity to begin a new game. We know that, because immediately after we hear Kol Nidre, we hear the words that God spoke after the sin of the scouts not trusting that God could bring us into the Promised Land: “I have forgiven as you have asked.” Or, in computer speak: “Reboot – you can begin a new game.”

So for the rest of the long day of Yom Kippur, you get to decide what to load back into your soul’s computer. This is really what teshuvah means: reloading your computer with what you need to restore your best vision of yourself, your best version of yourself, to return to the purpose for which you alone were created. A Chassidic master, the Slonimer Rebbe,

teaches: “From the moment we are created each one of us has a unique role and purpose in repairing the world, a unique mission given to us from Heaven. No one can fulfill someone else’s mission.”

Teshuvah is returning to that purpose, to that mission. Yom Kippur gives you the space and time to discern it.

Are you ready for a new game? What do you need in your computer?

What is the data you need to recalibrate?

What I need are some core memories, Jewish memories, that have shaped who I am and connect me with the values that have shaped my sense of purpose.

Memory Number One:

My sister Meggie died of cancer before I was born. She was two. My mother found out she was pregnant with me on the day of her funeral. We never talked too much about her, but there were always pictures of her in my parents’ bedroom. It wasn’t until I had a baby of my own that I was ready to hear the story. I learned that my parents mourned her

death very differently; my mom turned to family and friends for support. My dad was more private; it was very difficult for him to find solace. And then he went to talk to his rabbi, a man I never knew, who told him this story: “Once there was a caterpillar who noticed that every so often a lot of caterpillars would disappear. He became determined to find out where they went and he promised that if it ever happened to him, he would come back and let all the other caterpillars know. So, of course eventually he spun himself into a chrysalis and emerged a butterfly. True to his word he returned to the caterpillars, flapped his wings and tried to get their attention. But they never looked up, because they could never imagine that they had any connection to this beautiful creature.”

That story comforted my dad. To him Meggie was somehow always a part of his life, as a beautiful butterfly. Years later, as I sat in meditation, my mind wandered to that memory... and, in a kind of epiphany, I realized that that his sharing that story with me might have been central in my calling to become a rabbi. I felt the power that a rabbi had to

bring comfort to my father in such a dark time. Maybe I could do that with other people.

That is a Jewish core memory. It reminds me that healing from loss is possible and that life goes on, enriched by connection to a Jewish community.

Memory Number Two:

I was about six or seven. . There was a meeting of the social action committee of my parents' Reform synagogue in our living room. My brothers and I were supposed to be in our rooms upstairs, but, being a curious and nosy little girl, I snuck downstairs to listen. The adults were talking about selling houses as straws. That seemed so strange to me—a straw was something you used for a milkshake.

The next morning I asked my dad what they were talking about. “There are neighborhoods in this community where black people can't buy houses,” he said. “That's wrong. A straw is a white person who buys a house from another white person so he can sell it to a black person so

black people can live wherever they want. The meeting was about how we could help integrate housing in our city.”

“But I thought it was a meeting from Temple,” I said. “What does that have to do with being Jewish?”

My dad responded: “That is what it means to be Jewish: fixing what is broken in the world.”

That core memory reminds me that central to my purpose is tikkun olam.

Memory Number 3:

During the week of Passover of my freshman year at Brown, I participated in a sit-in for fair housing at the State House. Someone had brought in trays of delicious looking donuts. I was hungry and really tempted. But then I realized that not eating donuts and sitting in for fair housing were both ways to honor Passover

That core memory reminds me that the ethical and the ritual dimensions of Judaism both connect. Every year, as I reload my computer, I confront the ritual of reciting the Al Chets, the list of sins we confess out

loud. I am struck that the list does not include specific ritual violations but rather ethical lapses; for example, it doesn't say: for the sin we have caused against you by not keeping kosher, but rather, for the sin we have sinned against you in our eating and drinking. It doesn't say: for the sin we have sinned against you by not saying prayers, but rather, for the sins we have sinned against in our routine conversation (like gossip. We get in touch with those deeper values through a ritual act like confessing collective sins in public or not eating donuts or other chametz on Passover.

Memory Number 4:

In the summer after my freshman year in college, I drove to Memphis with a group of students and community activists to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Memphis. It was the year after the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King. I was one of the very few white people at the convention. I guess I was overwhelmed by the gospel singing and the church like atmosphere, so I went outside to try to figure out what I was doing there. The organizer who was leading our group

came out to check up on me. When I related my confusion, admitting that I felt like I didn't belong, he responded: "You are right. You don't belong here. You need to go back to your own community and do this work there."

The core memory of that gentle challenge helped me understand that my community is the Jewish community. That is the inner circle where I need to begin, never forgetting that that circle of my people is part of larger concentric circles of community --- the circle of my city, my country and my world.

Memory Number 5

I was the only woman in my rabbinical school class. We were studying the section from the Talmud that describes intercourse with a little girl as "nothing... (it is only) as if one puts a finger into the eye." While I understood that the rabbis were trying to protect the girl by asserting that she was really still a virgin and therefore the rape wouldn't affect her bride price, to me this was a "text of terror." No one, neither my male

classmates nor my male professor, understood how painful this text was for me. How could the rape of a little girl be “nothing”? To me, it was very personal. I was once a little girl!

That core memory continues to animate my conviction that women’s voices must be part of the Jewish conversation, and I need to be mindful that just as Jewish women were once invisible, there are still groups within the Jewish community and beyond who feel excluded and unseen. Bringing those on the margins onto the page is part of my mission.

Finally: Memory Number 6

My grandson’s bris. It was an intimate group. All of what my kids call “the parental units” had flown to Portland to be there. Both my son and daughter-in-law have divorced and recoupled parents. It hasn’t been easy for me to be with my former husband and his wife. But of course we were all there, along with the new aunts and uncles. The rabbi (yes, my kids actually did join a synagogue, although we’re paying the dues); the rabbi was really was terrific. She asked each of us to offer our

grandson a blessing. My son's father said to our grandson: "You have a complicated family. May you take what is best from each of us and know that the more people who love you, the richer you are."

At that moment I felt my heart soften, just a little.

This is a new core memory. It's about the power of ritual to heal. .

And it is about forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean accepting behavior that was unacceptable, but rather, letting go of the power of old dramas to continue to wound. Forgiveness means trying to move forward instead of looking back... and, instead of replaying the pain, working on being grateful for the blessings that are mine.

So tonight I begin by reloading those core memories. And they connect me to the promises I want to make again --- to the essence of who I really am. They remind me of my purpose, my mission. I hear Kol Nidre; I beat on my chest during the public confession as I try to crack open my heart. I remember my father, and the truth that healing from loss is possible and life goes on. I remember that I am part of a

community that brings both comfort and challenge to make a difference in the world. I remember that I am part of a tradition that keeps changing and that I can be part of the change. And I remember that I still have work to do to be the person I really want to be, more forgiving, more compassionate and more grateful. This night, this day, does have the power to change a person's life. It did for Rosensweig. It does for me.

Does it for you? What do you remember? What do you want to reload tonight? I'd like to invite you to share a memory that taught you something important about the Jewish values that matter to you. For some of you, Jews by birth, the memory might go back a long time; for others, Jews by choice or non-Jews who are part of a Jewish family, the memories might be more recent. We will take about five minutes. Please turn to another person, maybe not someone you know, sit quietly for 15 seconds to connect to that memory, One of you will go first, sharing for two minutes the memory and the values it taught you. Then sit quietly

for a few seconds, take a breath and then the other person will share for 2 minutes. Please begin,

Now take a breath. Maybe say thank you.

One more memory of mine, a difficult one, for it raises questions of who one becomes when it is hard to reload memories because the soul's computer is challenged by dementia. I think about my 93 year old mother, who has trouble remembering things. But thankfully, she is happy and grateful for the comforts of her life. Occasionally in our daily phone calls she laughs when she realizes that although she can remember that she doesn't like Donald Trump, she can't remember whether she watched the debates. But then she says: "the only important memory that I never want to lose is that I love you."

We all have work to do over these next 24 hours. Facing our naked souls, experiencing our own death and asking what is the purpose of our lives, our unique mission. And then slowly, as the day wears on, tired and hungry, as we let the music and the prayer and the poetry and the

study wash over us, our work is to reboot our computers and remember the moments that shape who we want to be and what we can learn from them.

That is teshuvah. Coming home. Rebooting. Beginning a new game.

(The sermon was followed by Neshama Carlebach's singing her father's powerful "Return again.")