

Teshuvah Bricks

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5784

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There was once a little synagogue in a cute little town where all the neighbors knew each other. The town was filled with red clay soil that wasn't very good for farming, but it was good for making bricks and pottery.

The town was a pretty new town, and almost everyone there was Jewish – a few friends named Emet, Adam, and Dinah, all in their twenties, had founded it when they started to work remotely, and invited others to join them. So for a while, the little synagogue didn't have many kids – Adam's older brother Noah had moved there with his two daughters, but they were the only kids around. Since there were only two kids, they just had religious school in the sanctuary of the little synagogue. But, eventually, the townspeople started having kids, and realized their synagogue was missing something: religious school classrooms!

When the first batch of kids were three, the rabbi started getting worried: the people donated a lot to build the synagogue, and didn't want to give more to build a religious school. So she had an idea: she could do a building campaign as part of her Rosh Hashanah sermon!

She opened up her mahzor to page 180¹ (and I recommend you do too), where it says that t'shuvah, t'filah, and tzedakah – prayer, repentance, and righteous giving – have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny. She knew that for now, her synagogue really needed three classrooms: one for Pre-K and kindergarten, one for first and second grade, and one for third and fourth grade. All the rest could wait a few years until the children got older. So on Rosh Hashanah she stood on the bimah and spoke to her congregation and said:

“This year, we're going to begin a very special project as a community. As you know, we need to build classrooms to fulfill our obligation to educate our children. So let's build to educate our children BY educating our children to be good people – who do t'shuvah

¹ All page numbers in this sermon reference *Mishkan HaNefesh: Rosh Hashanah*, eds. Rabbis Edwin Goldberg, Janet Marder, Sheldon Marder, and Leon Morris (CCAR Press, 2015).

and strive to become better versions of themselves, who attend t'filah particularly when supporting the joys and sorrows of others, and who engage in tzedakah, righteous giving. So here's the plan: we'll build one classroom with our t'shuvah, one classroom with our t'filah, and one classroom with our tzedakah.

For the t'shuvah classroom: during the ten days of repentance, bring a brick when you commit to improving yourself in the coming year, and use it as motivation: if you break the promise you make – to yourself, the people you care about, and God – to be better, come take back the brick. The t'shuvah classroom will be for pre-K and kindergarten, since we need that classroom first, and we can get all the bricks for it in just the ten days between now and Yom Kippur.

For the t'filah classroom, bring a brick every time you participate in a worship service to be with someone else during a time of joy or sorrow: a b'nai mitzvah in the family, an aufruf, a shiva minyan. The t'filah classroom will be for first and second grade. This one will take a little longer, but we have a little more time before we have first graders.

And for the tzedakah classroom, just bring whatever bricks your heart is moved to give, because giving in order to educate our children is righteous giving. This one will take the longest, because nothing specific will push you to give, but I believe that we can do it before our children are in third and fourth grade.

Our tradition teaches that our children shall be builders, so let us build for our children. Shanah tovah.”

That week, hundreds of bricks appeared for the t'shuvah classroom, as all the people in the town apologized to their friends and family for how they'd hurt them, engaged in introspection, and committed to being better in the year to come.

Adam promised he would stop intentionally doing a shoddy job on housework tasks so he could get defensive when his wife criticized his efforts and tell her to do every task herself if she didn't like how he did them.

Dinah confessed to her spouse the emotional affair she was having with someone at work, and promised to recommit herself to her marriage.

Emet promised themselves they would gossip less, and not soothe their own need for drama with other people's misfortune.

Noah apologized to his daughters for getting so angry at them when he was tired, hungry, or frustrated with work, and promised to be a more patient dad in the year to come.

The rabbi called her friends and apologized for canceling plans so often – sure, sometimes it was an emergency, but usually she just hadn't managed her time well. She promised to do better in the coming year.

Their bricks, and many others, formed a big pile next to the synagogue. By Yom Kippur, there were enough bricks to build a classroom for pre-K and kindergarten. The rabbi spoke on Yom Kippur about how proud she was to be part of a community that did such good t'shuvah, and she said that, after Sukkot, a team of volunteers would start to build the new classroom.

But even before Sukkot, bricks started disappearing.

Noah, who had promised to be a less angry and more patient dad, was home between morning and afternoon services on Yom Kippur, when he turned from hungry to hangry and got furious at his daughters for leaving their toys out. Right after break fast, he snuck over to the synagogue to take back his brick.

Emet managed to avoid gossip for a few days, but the day before Sukkot their best friend from college told them that their ex had broken up with his fiancé and was posting every detail on social media. Emet immediately spent three hours on the phone getting the dirt on their ex. That night, Emet went over to the synagogue and brought their brick home.

Bricks kept disappearing. Every morning, when the volunteers showed up, there were fewer bricks for the t'shuvah classroom than the day before. However, the piles of bricks for the t'filah and tzedakah classrooms were really starting to grow as October turned to November turned to December. People were praying together with their friends and families in times of joy and sorrow, and they were giving freely of their own hearts. But they just couldn't keep the promises they'd made during the days of repentance.

Dinah managed to go cold turkey on the long emails to her emotional affair partner – until November. After a stressful day, she caved, and sent a long, emotional email to the coworker she had fallen in love with. When her spouse asked her how her day had been, she said, “Fine.” She spent a couple days telling herself she hadn’t really restarted the affair, but that weekend she went to get her brick.

The rabbi managed to keep her plans with her friends except in true emergencies until right before Chanukah, when she realized she hadn’t put together any programs for the holiday, and canceled drinks with a friend in town, and a day trip to see another friend in the city. One morning while procrastinating in her office at the synagogue, she realized she needed to go grab her brick.

Adam wasn’t sure he ever consciously knew he was breaking his promise to stop being incompetent at home on purpose, but one time he washed a pair of his wife’s shoes with the laundry and ruined them when he was in a rush, and when his wife found the ruined shoes, **he** got angry and told her that if she wanted to be so specific about how to do laundry, she should do it herself. She told him to go get his brick.

By the time winter turned to spring, all the teshuvah bricks were gone. So the volunteers went to the rabbi and asked if they could use the t’filah and tzedakah bricks for the teshuvah classroom.

“What would that be teaching our children?” said the rabbi. “That they don’t have to do real teshuvah if they do other good things? No. Go ahead and build the other classrooms. We’ll have older students in the religious school eventually.”

The next year, when the school year started, there was no classroom for the pre-K and kindergarten students, so they had class outside. The rabbi hoped that by the time it got cold again, there would be a classroom for them. She had a plan. In her Rosh Hashanah sermon, she said:

“I’m so proud of our community for the acts of tefilah and tzedakah we’ve done together in the past year, but this is our time to recommit to teshuvah. As our

prayerbook reminds us on page 174, this day is full of awe and dread – let us take that seriousness and use it to recommit to our teshuvah.”

The people made the same promises, and over the weeks and months, they broke them in the same ways. When Rosh Hashanah rolled around again, there was still no teshuvah classroom, but there were children old enough to learn in the newly-completed tefilah classroom.

At this point, the rabbi was angry and stressed. How was she supposed to attract new members if there wasn't a classroom for the youngest learners!? In her Rosh Hashanah sermon she re-read page 178,

“Today it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed,
'Who shall live and who shall die!
Who by fire and who by water!
Who by sword and who by beast!’
Is that what you want? Failures of teshuvah and God's harsh decree?”

She was hopeful that this would get the people to keep their promises. Once again, many bricks appeared for the teshuvah classroom between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and once again, they all steadily disappeared. Around Purim, she started asking people why they didn't care about keeping their promises.

Dinah said, “Well, obviously every year I try, but I'm only human.”

Emet said, “I like how it feels, around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to really believe that I'm going to be better this year. But ultimately I am who I am.”

And Adam said, “You know, every year we say that God will write a harsh decree for those who sin and don't repent, but we're all still here. We know for a fact that everyone in this community breaks their promises. So, like, in the divine scheme of things, who cares? Let's just do a capital campaign for the classroom.”

Noah agreed with Adam. He added: “It's so final—we mess up once, and we just take back the whole brick. It doesn't leave us much motivation to keep trying. And it's hard to

forgive yourself after that! I just get so mad at myself when I mess up that I get stuck, so every year I hit Rosh Hashanah with the same habits as before.”

The rabbi heard what the others had to say, but she was determined to build the teshuvah classroom though teshuvah. That summer, she did a lot of thinking, and a lot of study, and came to Rosh Hashanah ready.

In her sermon, she had the congregation turn to page 174 again. She said:

“Today is a day of awe and dread, but also a day of truth – today God ‘reigns in truth.’ But we’ve been lying to ourselves. Every year, we’ve been telling ourselves that we can flip the switch, Just change, as if like magic, Into the people that we want to be. We’ve spent the past few years trying to live out Un’tane Tokef, this big, central prayer, to ground our lives in teshuvah, tefilah, and tzedakah. But I’ve failed to dig deeply enough into the power and wisdom of this prayer. By asking you all to take back your bricks when you mess up, I’ve focused too much on the harshness of the decree.

So let’s look at what Untane Tokef says on page 180 AFTER t’shuvah, t’filah and tzedakah:

כִּי כָשָׁמְךָ כֵּן תְּהִלָּתְךָ, קָשָׁה לְקַעוֹס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצּוֹת

You are everything that we praise You for:

Slow to anger, quick to forgive.

וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תִּחַכֶּה לּוֹ, אִם יָשׁוּב מִיַּד תִּקְבְּלוּ

Until the day we die, You wait for each of us;

You accept us at once if we repent and return.

אֲמַת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא יוֹצְרֵם וְיוֹדֵעַ יִצְרֵם, כִּי הֵם בְּשָׂר וְדָם

Since You created us, You know our impulses;

Since we are but flesh and blood.’

I’ve been committed to harshness where God is not. God forgives us, understands that we are fallible, that we will, inevitably, mess up as we pursue our own growth. God waits for us, is patient with us, for God knows that our nature is to stray from the right path. So if we are created in God’s image, let’s be patient with ourselves, let’s know our

own nature, not as an excuse not to grow, but as a means toward growing better.

Because let's look at page 182:

'We who are mortal—our origin is dust, and so is our end.

We wear out our lives to get our bread—

Like broken vessels, like withered grass,

Like a flower that must fade,

A shadow moving on, a cloud passing by,

Mere dust on the wind, a dream that flies away.'

So this year, we'll make our promises, but we won't bring a brick for making promises.

When we mess up, We'll look at the dust that's created when we fire our bricks in the kiln, or the shattered pieces of brick when we drop them, and remember that we are

but dust, that our insides are shattered pottery, trying but never quite succeeding to be whole. In those moments, let us recommit to our teshuvah, not give up until next year.

This year, we'll bring bricks when we're successful, and accept ourselves anew each and every time we are righteous. I pray that next Rosh Hashanah, we'll be using our teshuvah classroom for youth programming during services."

The teshuvah classroom was finally finished right before the following Pesach, and though the words were odd for the season, the whole community celebrated by singing the words of *Ki K'shimcha* on page 180, the promise of God's patience that kept them committed to their task. The people of the town weren't perfect, but they were building themselves, brick by brick, into who they could become.

May it be so for us as well. Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah.