

Black On Black: Numbers and Tefillin Straps -- Yom Kippur 5769 (2008)

In the 1970's, as a young rabbinic student in Jerusalem, I would ride the bus to school every morning. And on the arms of some of the men who rode the daily bus with me, I noticed two things. First, the black numbers that had been tattooed on their arms by the Nazis. And second, the faint impressions left on their skin by their black Tefillin straps, which they had wrapped around their arms earlier in morning prayer.

I remember being perplexed by this juxtaposition of suffering and faith – subtly displayed on the flesh of a forearm. How could these men, who had experienced the horror of the Holocaust, who had been tattooed, and inventoried, and interned in extermination camps – how could they still pray? And yet, here they were, having been touched by the greatest evil the modern age has known, now riding a Jerusalem bus, on their way from the morning Shachrit service.

What were these Tefillin straps to them, I wondered? At the time, I imagined them to be like soothing bandages, wrapped around a still painful wound. The one question, however, that I could never penetrate is what faith and prayer meant to these fellow bus riders after all they had seen? For them, the predictability of life and the fairness of universe were swept away. They stood, like lonely charred trees in a burned down forest.

In fact, this was perhaps the cruelest part of the Holocaust – the arbitrariness of who was killed and who was saved. As any survivor will tell you, it was a lottery, and many were spared by mere chance. This is probably why survivor's guilt is so deeply intense. Nobody deserved their fate – either to die or to live.

In a self-reflective poem, a non-Jewish poet, Vslava Shimburska, wrote this to the Jews:

You were saved, because you were first.

You were saved, because you were last.

Because you were single. Because you were male.

Because you were to the left, because to the right.

Because it was raining. Because the darkness fell.

Because of the bright sunny weather.

It was luck that a forest was there.

It was luck that there were no trees.

It was luck that there was a trail, a hook, a beam, a handbrake;

A structure, a turn in the road, a millimeter, a moment.

It was luck that a ray of light glinted off the water.

Because of, afterward that, in spite of and anyways,

What would have been if only hand, foot,

By a footstep, by a hair's breadth, by happenstance.

On Yom Kippur, in particular, I imagine that prayer is hard for a Holocaust survivor. Especially, the Unetaneh Tokef, in which we confront the question, “Who shall live and who shall die?”, and the only answer we seem to receive, is that Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can annul the evil decree.

What must that mean to a survivor? That an infant carried in her mother’s arms to the gas chambers was not worthy, because her parents did not pray hard enough or give enough Tzedakah? That infant wasn’t good enough to annul the decree, didn’t merit being spared from death?

I will tell you that if this is Judaism, I quit being a rabbi. Just as survivors who lost their families to the Nazis, could never return to the living, if this is what they believed.

No, I know there has to be another meaning to this prayer. Another reason those bare arms on Jerusalem buses bore tattooed numbers and impressions of Tefillin straps. In their pain and their strength, these arms have an answer for us.

And, indeed, this is a time we need answers. For, yes, a lot of our suffering does seem random. Fire burning down some homes and sparing others on the same street in North County last year. This year, a failing economy that has us who have worked so hard and carefully, losing our jobs, our home values, our savings. Not to mention all the other things that happen in the course of a life – random illness or sudden death of a loved one, a marriage that comes unraveled, a disturbing problem with our children, a new boss who turns our lives upside down.

How do we wrap our Tefillin straps around all that?

I read this year that one Pastor, Will Bowen, decided to take a stand on the issue with his congregation. He begins his Sunday worship by shouting, “God is good!” And his congregation shouts back, “All the time!”

Bowen’s idea is that people just complain too much. Yes, we all suffer setbacks and losses. But, Bowen wants people to concentrate more on their blessings, and less on their problems. So, he decided to hand out to the members of his congregation purple spirit bracelets. He said negative talk produces negative thoughts, and negative thoughts produce negative results.

His challenge was, stop complaining for twenty one days. Put on the bracelet and, each time you catch yourself complaining, then switch the bracelet to the other wrist and reset the clock. It took Bowen himself, three months to stop complaining and most people much longer.

By the way, after being picked up on the local news, Bowen has now appeared on the Today Show and Oprah, and mailed out over 5 million of his purple spirit bracelets around the world.

So, I began to wonder. Are these like purple Tefillin straps? And the more I looked into it, the more my answer was . . . sort of, but not powerful enough.

The problem I have, is that I’m not a big fan of Behavior Modification as a cure-all. Just slapping a bracelet on our wrist for kvetching isn’t going to get us there. When really bad things happen, we need a lot more. We need understanding and insight into our situation, we need courage and strength to face it, and we need to develop a worthy human response.

This is where the U’netaneh Tokef comes in, although it is such a hard prayer to hear on Yom Kippur. Because it seems to suggest that we Jews brought our Tzuris on ourselves – maybe if we had just prayed more, or if we had given more Tzedakah, we wouldn’t get cancer, or lose our young Israeli soldiers in war.

To be honest, that’s what I always thought the prayer meant, and I’ve choked on the words. But one scholar, Rabbi Mark Saperstein, points out that this is actually a serious misreading of the prayer. You see, it’s not that Repentance, Prayer, and Charity cancel out the decree. Certain things are going to happen, no matter what. Rather, what Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can do, is take some of the

bitterness out. The severity of how we experience the decree, whatever it is, can be tempered by our response.

Rabbi Sapperstein wrote: "death, sickness, impoverishment . . . bear a potential for truly evil consequences. They can poison, embitter, fill us with self-pity, destroy a marriage, blind us to the needs of others, turn us away from God. . . . If penitence, prayer and charity cannot change the external reality, if they cannot arrest the malignant cancer, they can indeed . . . enable us to transcend the evil of the decree."

In other words, this is not about why bad things happen, but about how we respond to them. Because, in their wisdom, our rabbis realized that, to a large extent, our response determines how bitter the consequences will be for us. And what can often help us cope, what can enable us to endure, are precisely Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah.

Now I understand that these are not as easy as one purple spirit bracelet. But, they are our Jewish tool box. They help us to keep *roah ha-gezerah*, the severity of the decree, in our power – because the one thing we can control is how we experience bad stuff and what we will let it do to us.

I know it sounds maybe a little too religious, or even simplistic. But, let me see if I can bring this lofty idea down to the real world in which you and I live, and explain how these three responses can go a lot further in your life than a purple bracelet.

Teshuvah, is essentially about disciplining ourselves to be the kind of people who take the high road in life, no matter what, even in the most trying of circumstances. Perhaps the best example of a person who devoted himself to this practice, was the great psychoanalyst, Viktor Frankel. In his famous book, "Man's Search for Meaning," he wrote:

We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Entering the inner rooms of people's lives, I have come to see that no matter what trial we face, those who rise to their best selves are the ones who emerge the least shaken and the most secure. We may not be able to control others, but we can always control ourselves.

We can behave with honor and respect in a painful and potentially bitter divorce. We can act with honesty when others in our company are stealing and cheating. We can still love, live, and keep faith, even when experiencing cruel and unfair losses.

And what can help us to be that kind of person, is Tefillah, prayer. The great philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, was once interviewed about the power and purpose of prayer on an old 1972 NBC program called, "The Eternal Light."

In a follow up question, he was asked, ". . . if you're saying that if God were to control every aspect of man's life, it would not be living, then that raises the question: why pray to God, then? If God is not going to interfere, if God is not going to intervene, if God is not going to help, what is the role of prayer?"

Heschel answered brilliantly. He said: "First of all, let us not misunderstand the nature of prayer, particularly in Jewish tradition. The primary purpose of prayer is not to make requests. The primary purpose of prayer is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song. Prayer may not save us, but prayer may make us worthy of being saved."

You see, Heschel taught that prayer is what restores our sense of awe and wonder, what connects us to the values we cherish, what reminds us of who we are and where we come from. Even when we

are lost, even when the world around us is lost – we have prayer to bring us back, our lifeline to our highest ideals and noblest vision for the world. That is the power of prayer.

Then there is Tzedakah. I would have to say that the people I admire most are those who have faced adversity and somehow, in spite of everything, managed to find the best inside of them. It was almost as if their suffering coaxed greatness out of them.

Some years ago, one of our teenagers, Brian Remas, suddenly began to experience seizures and personality altering symptoms. For several years, he went in and out of Children's Hospital for critical brain surgeries – eight years in total. Yet, in all the times I visited him, his spirit never dimmed. Even when there didn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel, there was light blazing forth from his eyes. Brian ultimately pulled through in his senior year of High School, and has been in great health ever since. And so, being an avid bike rider, he then went out and started his own charity, which he called, "Bike for Brains." His goal was to raise money to advance the technology in the neurosurgical unit of Children's Hospital, to bring even better care to kids like him.

A couple of years ago, another of our members, then ten year old, Keri Jucha, developed a life-threatening condition resulting from a sinus infection which spread to her brain. Before she knew it, she, too, was in Children's Hospital recovering from life-saving surgery. Not one to sit still, she picked up a beading kit and began making bracelets and necklaces for all her visitors and friends. She was so industrious, that she soon had a huge surplus of her handmade jewelry. So, what did she do? What any creative pre-teen would do – she launched a website, and began to auction her jewelry to raise money for Children's Hospital. She had noticed that the children in her ward did not have a place to come together and watch videos. So, she single handedly raised nearly \$8,000 and donated a home movie theater, portable DVD players, and stuffed animals and toys for the hospital playroom. And she's already planning her upcoming Bat Mitzvah project – laptop computers for the kids, now that there's wireless reception in the hospital.

And finally, I have to include in this group one of our most precious teens, Sean Robins. He was diagnosed with cancer at age sixteen. At first it seemed like something very treatable, and he and his family battled fiercely. Not just to treat Sean's cancer, but to fight every day so that Sean should have a normal life and an opportunity to reach his amazing potential. Sean was funny, courageous, and one of the most genuine kids I've ever known. He used his bald head to his advantage, starring as Daddy Warbucks in Annie. He was accepted to Northwestern University and enrolled in classes twice, but was never well enough to attend. At one point, he even made it out on his own, and moved into his own apartment. But, again the cancer returned and, at age 22, this beautiful life was returned to the Source of life.

However, Sean's story does not end there. Because in his memory, his family has established the Seany Foundation, which is raising thousands of dollars for pediatric cancer research and the Moores UCSD Cancer Center here in San Diego. Sean's optimistic, unstoppable spirit is still very much with us.

So, how does Tzedakah help lessen the harshness of the decree? Ask Brian and Keri, and Mitch and Amy Robins. It doesn't take away the random, devastating tragedies that happen to us and our children. It just helps us get through them, and gives them a greater meaning, and gives us a higher purpose.

Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah – they are like Tefillin bandages on our hurting wounds. They help us survive defeat, they help us heal, and they show us the way back to life.

Our Jewish philosophers, from Maimonides to Heschel, would tell us that God gave us the world as it is. We work with whatever we have. We choose life, even in the face of death. And after having faced death, we choose life again. How we respond to adversity defines our very character.

The Israeli writer, Lysie Doron, died of cancer in 1990 at the age of 40, and was herself the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. She was raised alone by her mother, a woman scarred and completely cut

off from her early promise by the horror she had experienced. Spiritually, her mother was a shell. Physically, she was far older than her years. But, emotionally, she was determined to make a home for her daughter.

Returning to her mother's empty home for Shiva, Doron reflected after her mother's death: "I remembered Fridays, when she spread her hands before the Shabbat candles, moved her lips, closed her eyes and stood silently. That's how she always stood before the candles, not blessing, not praying. Her legs were swollen and heavy, and her travails were etched in her many wrinkles – she was prematurely aged. Only the palms of her hands, spread over the small flames, bore testimony to the beauty that might have been. The palms of her hands were delicate, smooth and tender, with long, slender fingers. The palms of a lady. Only one finger, the little finger, was bent and frozen. 'Mother, what happened to your little finger?' 'It's a souvenir from over there,' she replied. . . . I remembered people's glances catching the folded finger, children's whispers: 'Look, look, the woman without a little finger.' And mother telling me proudly: 'Alone, with nine fingers, I built a family here.'"

On this awe-filled day, I would say to you – we all, every one of us, have nine fingers. We are all wounded, fearful, and incomplete. We are missing parts, we are missing beloved people, we are missing what we lost and what we never gained.

We don't even need wristbands to remind us of all the things we should not complain about.

But how we wish to respond, how we plan to meet evil, tragedy, loss – that is what we have to talk about, you and I, and what we shall vow and decree today. *Roah ha-gezerah*, the severity of the decree, that is what is in our hands!

Liyse Doron's mother, despite all that conspired against her, that took her beauty, her promise, her husband, her little finger – she built a family and a country. As did the millions of refugees who flooded into Israel with nothing but brokenness, and then plowed fields, and started families, and birthed a proud new generation.

And that is how those men came to ride my Jerusalem bus each day with their numbers and their prayers on their arms. You see, I finally leaned their secret – the one was an answer to the other, prayer a response to pain. Not, "God, why did you let this happen?" But, "God, may I overcome my anger, my grief, my loss. May I be a person, a Jew, a mench, worthy of salvation."

Yes, the wearers of the numbers are leaving us, and the wearers of Tefillin may be decreasing. But, I tell you this – those numbers are now etched on our souls, and the Shema is engraved in our hearts. And they give us the choice of who we wish to be – as wives and husbands, as parents and children, as friends, as Jews.

Will we succumb to the numbers and the bitter evil they can still bring out of us? Or will we sing and chant and make of our lives a Shir Ha-ma'alot, a song of holy ascent?

That choice, is *Roah ha-gezerah*, the dividing line between life and death. And I say, on this awe-filled day, let it be life. With our numbers and our Tefillin straps, let us choose life!