

Rabbi Hayim of Tzanz used to tell this parable: A person, wandering lost in the forest for several days, finally encountered another. They called out: “My friend, show me the way out of this forest.” The other replied: “Friend, I too am lost. I can only tell you this: The ways I have tried lead nowhere; they have only led me astray. Take my hand, and let us search for the way together.” Rabbi Hayim would add: “So it is with us. When we go our separate ways, we may go astray. Let us join hands and look for the way together.”

Last year, right around this time, I got lost in a forest. Shir Tikvah’s ensemble and I were in the middle of a rehearsal, playing a piece composed by Shlomo Carlebach, a rabbi whose music has sunk so deeply into Jewish consciousness that his melodies sound like they’ve always been around. We played together for a while and out of the music erupted a conversation about the conflicting legacies of Carlebach - a legacy of transgressed personal boundaries and sexual assault - of ecstatic music and spiritual invigoration - and of communal silence.

Carlebach, who died in 1994, was confronted in private in the months leading up to his death by women who he had sexually violated. Survivors spoke out about being abused by a rabbi they had trusted, a respected and honored guest of their communities - stories that stretched over decades in silence until they entered public consciousness in the years after Carlebach’s death. While stories exist of Carlebach acknowledging the need for healing, he didn’t engage in a process of communal teshuva or accountability before he died.

Carlebach’s story is not a unique one, not in the Jewish world, nor in wider society. As a Jewish community, we grapple with what to do with the work of individuals - King David, Shlomo Carlebach and Steven M. Cohen - who are simultaneously leaders in their fields and abusers and transgressors of the boundaries of others. Through the courageous organizing of the #MeToo movement and the survivors who broke the

silence, these questions - and the need for communal teshuva - is coming to be more widely recognized.

The Medieval Spanish rabbi and philosopher Maimonides - or Rambam - writes in great detail about the process of teshuva - of spiritual healing and atonement. He maps out the specific steps that one must go through in order to make amends. As my friend and colleague, Rabbi Adina Allen of the Bay Area Jewish Studio Project, writes: A brief overview of Rambam's work *Hilkhot Teshuva* might read: teshuva asks us to do four things: **recognize, regret, resolve and refrain**. Recognize what you did wrong. Regret both what you did and the pain it caused others. Resolve never to do it again. Uphold that promise by refraining from that action.

We at Shir Tikvah come to our tradition ready to crack our hearts open, to share music from across time and place, to heal, to connect to our ancestors, to build an intentional intergenerational multi-gender, diverse community. We come yearning to sing our way through grief, joy, longing and liberation. What healing - what teshuva - do we need to do in order to merit this spiritual practice? What teshuva must we do for violation of trust by leaders, by teachers, by our ancestors?

Journalist Courtney Martin wrote in an article on healing from the impacts of white supremacy: "We need to have a sense that we are collectively capable of redemption, or we get stuck in guilt or grow fragile or end up hiding or getting defeatist and giving up. We give up on the project of being accountable for our own actions — and, yes, even the actions of our ancestors — because we don't really have faith in our capacity to heal..."

To undertake the project of transformative teshuva, we need to believe we're capable of it. Teshuva is a framework that moves us away from the imagination that simply by bringing perpetrators to justice, we might heal. While that process of accountability is

a crucial step, systemic oppression - white supremacy, patriarchy - cannot be transformed by prosecution of individuals alone. We are all touched, woven through, with these systems. We experience ourselves and everyone we know through these systems. These oppressive systems are pervasive exactly because each of us is bound up in them, enacting them even in our activism and resistance to them. To heal from systemic oppression will mean to transform both dominant narrative and the very fibers of our being.

We can get stymied by the need for purity of process, purity of thought. We get frozen by the fear we might not get it right the first time. It's as though we imagine that somehow it's all or nothing. That we need to stay silent and still until we have a fully realized vision of how we might heal the wounds of systemic oppression. And so we fall silent. We freeze.

Last fall, I put a freeze on playing Carlebach's music. I hushed him. For months, our rabbis and musicians navigated the musical holes in our service: learning new melodies, contending with nostalgia for the melodies that were off-limits. Until we had grappled with his legacy, I felt, we as a community shouldn't get to enjoy his music...not when we had so much work to do. I listened, a lot: to the clergy team, to Neshama, Carlebach's daughter, to friends and colleagues, to many of you. But I wasn't ready to talk publicly about it. I wanted to be able to visualize the process we would undertake to do teshuva, not just to heal the rabbi's legacy, but to transform ourselves.

I froze in the complexity of my own identity. As a new Jewish communal leader, a woman, as a musician who believes in the power of musical prayer, I felt caught up in the complexity of the demands this teshuva made on me, on my body, and on the community.

I froze in the face of the pain and the lack of clarity of this situation for many months. But as psychologist David Richo writes, “Hidden in everything negative is something alive and beautiful that wants to belong to us” -- through the process of reflection -- and especially as I prepared to write this d’var, new channels of personal healing began to emerge for me, from which I pray communal teshuva might flow.

Teshuva must be released from the belief that we needed to know exactly how to do it before we take it on. It gets to be safe and playful, consensual, accountable to those harmed and committed to growth and wisdom. It gets to be cyclical and sloppy, repetitive and partial, not tidily completed by Yom Kippur...and still be profoundly worth it.

This year, I imagine us meeting in a laboratory of teshuva, where we might experiment with forgiveness and atonement for wrongs done. In this teshuva lab, we expose our broken hearts, experiment with reconciliation and healing, fail, reflect and return to each other, in time, ready to try again. The teshuva lab allows us to become, over time, right-sized; to discover humility, as we played with the many facets of our souls.

Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Eish Kodesh, the rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote in 1941 of the creative power of teshuva: “The time for repentance is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world. This is because repentance...is also a kind of creativity.” (RH 5702/1941) Rather than turning away from our missteps, he taught, teshuva requires us to turn towards those places in which we have faltered and failed, where we have mistreated and missed the mark, and to create new possibilities.

This season is a lab, giving us the time and framework to work through the hurts we’ve accumulated through the year. There is no teacher in this lab, no head scientist to lead us through this process towards a forgone conclusion. It’s just us and our broken

hearts, us and our instincts, us and our stories, us and our deep listening to the truths of those around us, us and the liturgy of our yamim noraim.

As a community, we've just had a phase of this experiment in teshuva: a year without Carlebach's music. A year of hush. But this phase was incomplete, inadequate: we didn't invite the voices of survivors to fill the silence. We didn't evaluate together how we as a community have been complicit in the pervasive violation of intimate boundaries by men in leadership positions. We didn't get to sing Carlebach's music, holding it in tension with his legacy. We didn't cause more harm, God willing, but we didn't heal either, we didn't shift. We paused.

Rosh Hashana is known as hayom harat olam - the day the earth was conceived. Our liturgy reminds us: "Today the world stands as at birth. Today all creation is called to judgment." The liturgical emphasis on the word "today" suggests that this is no mere anniversary celebration; rather all humanity - and all creation - are re-created anew today.

Hayom harat olam - this is the day the world was conceived - out of chaos and possibility, formless and void. And we, too, are re-conceived today. As the rabbis taught each person is an olam katan - the world in miniature. Just as the world is re-created today, each of us has access to new possibilities, new resolution. We can release ourselves from past freeze, to experiment with new outcomes.

The poet Zelda wrote:

In that strange night

someone asked:

Can you change the past?

And the woman who was ill angrily responded:

The past is not a piece of jewelry

sealed in a crystal box

nor is it a snake preserved in a bottle of formaldehyde --

The past trembles
within the present
and when the present falls into a pit
the past goes with it --
when the past looks toward heaven
all of life is upraised,
even the distant past.

Many of us carry scars and tenderness from violence done. This harm is exacerbated by a communal reluctance to engage, to listen, to respond. Past harms get frozen when they are not engaged, with care. When we begin to actively heal, it is not just our present that can be transformed, but the power of the past. Through present actions, through our re-conceiving of ourselves and our communities today, we disrupt dominant narrative, unfix habits, raise up our broken pieces.

Let's bring the struggle to heal the harm done by individuals and our patriarchal society, which normalizes sexual violence across power, to our teshuva lab. We didn't invent these pains or these harmful structures, but we have inherited them. We don't need to solve them, but we do have the responsibility to shift them. We must lean as much as we can towards hard truths. That we might, when God forbid, we are harmed, when our boundaries are violated, when the sacredness of our self is shaken, have access, safety and grounding to tell the truth of our experience in community. That we might, when we are held accountable for harm that we have caused, be able to hold hard truths and realizations without freezing, to do the necessary work of atonement. That we might better hold each other's beloved, bruised spirits.

Our engagement with Carlebach's music, with his legacy, gets to be part of our experiment in teshuva. We must listen closely to survivors of his actions and hear their experiences. We get to make space to learn even more deeply what safety in communal spaces looks like. We get to speak together about Carlebach's legacy, about the legacy of other abusers in our wider community. We must open ourselves

to the truth of sexual violence in our own community - because we know that this is not simply about Carlebach but a culture that permits and enables violence. We must atone. When we come to a place of recognition and regret, we can then experiment: with singing and not singing, with direct confrontation and deep system transformation, that we might dislodge sexual violence from its place in our society.

May we raise our voices like a shofar, in love with the world, in faith that we can do better, grow closer, heal. May we call out to each other when we are lost in the forest of history, of trauma. May we cry out, in hope and in grief; and may our call become a song, beckoning to a different world. May it beckon us towards healing. Towards new growth. Towards transformation.

Hayom harat olam - this is the day the world is conceived, this is the day that who we are and what we stand for is re-conceived. May we lean towards teshuva with our whole hearts. May we be gentle and courageous. May we take each other's hands and find our way through this forest together.

L'shana tova metukah u'tzedekah. Shnat tzedek v'shalom. May this be a good year, a sweet year and a year of redemptive, transformative justice.

Loosen, loosen baby
you don't have to carry
the weight of the world in your muscles and bones
let go

holy breath and holy name
can you heal this pain

Out of the Woods, Into the Lab:
Bringing Our Pain to the Teshuva Lab
Rosh Hashana 5779
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