

## T'SHUVAH: Repentance and Forgiveness/Lisë Stern

Repent  
Pent all over again  
Spent a month or two looking over myself  
When I thought I wasn't looking  
When I thought no one could see  
In a sea of tears  
Mixed up with fears  
Salty salted over from worrying  
Amid concern  
Discerning turning thoughts over  
And over  
And moreover once more  
Did I do the wrong thing  
Missed a mark when it could have been hit  
By closing my eyes  
Against the things I can pretend not to see  
Rationalizing  
Analyzing  
An inconvenience  
Bemoaning  
From a safe distance

A society that lets an unwashed crazy man  
Triggered by demons we couldn't see  
On a subway platform  
Relegated to waiting because we saw  
Our train car close its doors and pull away  
Just as we descended the stairs  
Sitting comfortably  
In uncomfortable enameled metal seats  
When a twitching man sat beside us  
Talking in a mumble  
To those we couldn't see  
And louder  
Frantic  
Upset  
Interacting agitated  
Frustrated

But only with those not physically present  
But louder  
Till we rationalized that our proximity might be the  
trigger  
So we figured  
Unspoken, a casual rise and move might calm  
And my friend  
Once we were a distance away  
A safe distance bemoaned the state of a world that  
is not caring for those  
Calling out for help  
On a subway platform on a summer Sunday  
afternoon  
And I rationalized that my safety might be  
compromised  
Had I stayed  
Even as I missed an opportunity  
To listen  
To offer  
What  
A calm voice  
What  
A moment of humanity  
A potential balm perhaps  
Forgive me  
And thank you  
For the opportunity to reflect on missed  
opportunities for grace  
Space to listen  
To fashion a prayer  
For healing  
To those dealing with their own demons  
There but for fortune  
I am able to hear another tune  
And repent and appreciate and annotate and hesitate  
and wonder if perhaps

As a rabbinical student/rabbi-in-training, I tend to start focusing on t'shuvah, repentance, during the last month of the year, that is, Elul. Elul is the month leading up to Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, and Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. That day is all about repentance, inner reflections, on behavior of the past year.

But having just spent two plus months interning as a Spiritual Counselor here at Beit T'Shuvah, I've thought about repentance on an almost daily basis. The name of this amazing institution, Beit T'Shuvah, means House of Repentance, also House of Return. And part of the work that the residents here do as a component of their path to sobriety is weekly T'Shuvah groups. In these groups we examine a text related to repentance -- it may be a poem, a prayer, an essay -- and we discuss the implications and inspirations. Then each resident shares ways

they hit or missed the mark during the week. Sometimes we as a group give feedback and delve further into these personal reflections. In this respect, we are all both learners and teachers.

My personal daily prayer practice is to daven, pray, shacharit, the traditional morning service, either in a synagogue in person or online, or on my own. I began this daily routine almost exactly three years ago when my beloved Dad passed away in August 2020. The central prayer of the service is the Amidah, standing prayer, which is comprised of 19 separate blessings for the weekday version. I have been working with residents here in a spirituality group where we look at each blessing one by one, and then write a reflection inspired by the blessing. This week, we looked at a pair

הַשִּׁיבֵנו אֲבוּנוּ לְתוֹרָתְךָ,  
וְקַרְבֵנו מִלְּפָנֶיךָ לְעִבּוֹדְךָ,  
וְהַחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי,  
הַרוֹצֵה בְּתַשׁוּבָה:

Restore us, our Father, to your Torah  
draw us near, our King, to your service;  
cause us to return to you in complete repentance.  
**Blessed are you, Adonai,  
who desires repentance.**

סִלַּח לָנוּ אֲבוּנוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ,  
מִחַל לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ,  
כִּי אֵל טוֹב וְסֹלֵחַ אַתָּה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי,  
חַנוּן הַמְרַבֵּה לְסִלַּח:

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned  
Pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed  
For You are a good and forgiving God.  
**Blessed are you, Adonai,  
Gracious One who forgives abundantly**

Notably, these are the only blessings in the Amidah that refer to God as “Our Father, our King” -- language that is used during the High Holy Days and the lengthy prayer that ends

אֲבוּנוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ חַנוּן וְעַנּוּן כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ

*Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, for we have no meritorious deeds; deal charitably and kindly with us and save us.*

My study partner rabbi-to-be Akiva Nelson suggested that perhaps using the name of God “Our Father” is a connection specifically for repentance, a link between this Amidah prayer we say six days a week throughout the year, and the time of deep repentance and self-examination that happens during the period of the high Holy Days.

Of note, this pair of blessings come after the blessing where we thank God for giving us knowledge. Implying that we need information in order to be introspective. In our discussion of these texts this week, one resident stated that repentance is an action, active between you another person, and between you and God. Another [Patrick] commented that both light and dark serve a purpose, that repentance, t’shuvah, is to learn and not be in torment while doing so. Another [Rosie], wrote, the work of repentance is the work of improving ourselves, so that the next time we come to the fork in the road, we will make the right choice.”

It is significant, in Judaism, that we cannot ask forgiveness from God for something we have done to hurt another person -- we have to obtain their forgiveness first. The forgiveness we ask from God is for ways we may have affected our relationship with God alone. And that is the beauty of this forgiveness prayer -- God who forgives abundantly, with love. Another resident (Ruby) observed that we ourselves may not be able to forgive others if we cannot forgive ourselves. And that is one of the big challenges for those here in recovery -- self forgiveness, self love. In order to love out and those around us, we have to love within our own skin, within our own selves.

I likely will not be able to ask forgiveness for ignoring and not recognizing the humanity of the man on the subway platform. But I can hold him in my heart, and hope that the next time I will acknowledge the humanity of all those around me. With gratitude to a space that allows for returning, repentance, and forgiveness.