

Repentance, Grade Inflation, and Self-Affirmation

Parashat Nitzavim, Deuteronomy, Chapters 29-30 | September 22, 2022

In his memoir about attending Harvard, Ross Douhat describes the one member of the faculty who had long been a critic of the university's lax grading policies: Harvey Mansfield. So tough was Mansfield as a grader, that he was known by the nickname, Harvey "C-" Mansfield. But one year, Mansfield announced that he had decided that being the one tough grader left at Harvard unfairly penalized students for taking a class with him. He therefore announced a new policy. He would give his students two grades, an official one and a private one:

I have decided that this semester I will issue two grades to each of you. The first will be the grade that you actually deserve—a C for mediocre work, a B for good work, and an A for excellence. This one will be issued to you alone, for every paper and exam that you complete. The second grade, computed only at semester's end, will be your, ah, ironic grade—'ironic' in this case being a word used to mean lying—and it will be computed on a scale that takes as its mean the average Harvard grade, the B-plus. This higher grade will be sent to the registrar's office, and will appear on your transcript. It will be your public grade, you might say, and it will ensure, as I have said, that you will not be penalized for taking a class with me. And of course, only you will know whether you actually deserve it.

This week, let us examine what it means to grade ourselves and whether giving ourselves an honest grade, as difficult as it may be, may actually become the most self-affirming thing we can do.

In some of his last words to the people of Israel, Moses joined together two different, but related concepts. The first is the notion of repentance.

And thou shalt return to the Lord thy God, and hearken to his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thy heart and with all thy soul. (Deuteronomy 30:2)

The Hebrew word for repentance, "teshuva," derived from this verse and others, means "return to God." Immediately after, Moses delivers one of the most famous sentences in the Torah, describing the choice facing Israel between goodness and sin, right and wrong.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

We have the ability to choose, and to choose life. For Maimonides, who codified the central doctrine of Judaism, it is the belief in free will that makes all of Judaism and its commandments possible. He cites our verse in his code of law:

And, this matter is a great and component part, the very pillar of the Torah and its precepts, even as it is said: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil" (Deut. 30.15), and it is, moreover, written: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and curse" (Ibid. 11.26). This is as if saying, the power is in your hand, and whatever human activity man may be inclined to carry on he has a free will to elect either good or evil.

Interestingly, Maimonides chose to place his discussion about free will not in the opening section of his

code of law, where the philosophical principles of Judaism are delineated, but rather in his laws of repentance, just as free will and repentance are joined in Moses' words. This points to something very deep in the way that Judaism approaches repentance and the way that the Jewish High Holidays are structured.

The rabbis of the Talmud originally debated which sort of animal horn would be best to blow on Rosh Hashanah. According to one opinion, the more twisted or curved a shofar is, the better. According to another approach, the straighter the shofar, the more ideal it is for this ritual.

What difference does it make whether a shofar is twisted or straight? The Talmud explains that the argument embodies a debate regarding one's proper emotional posture on Rosh Hashanah. The curved or twisted shofar depicts the Jew engaged in *teshuva*—bent over, humble, in full awareness of his or her flaws and misdeeds. After all, this day is considered one of judgment. How then can we not cower and quiver contritely as we acknowledge all our imperfections? The other opinion, however, insists that the straight shofar is more appropriate, for it embodies the human being standing upright, self-affirming, confident, while praying in the presence of the Divine.

This latter explanation points to another theme of this day. Rosh Hashanah is marked by Jews as the anniversary of the creation of the world and, in particular, the creation of mankind in the image of God. What does it mean to be created in God's image? The great exegete Ovadiah Seforno explains that mankind is akin to the Almighty because, in his words, "man can be compared to God, for man operates through free will." This is what it means to be created in the image of the Divine. If we celebrate this at the beginning of the Days of Awe, it is because only when we have a true awareness of our moral capacity can repentance take place.

Moses and Moses Maimonides join repentance and free will because the two must go hand in hand, just as Rosh Hashanah in the Jewish calendar precedes the Day of Atonement in order to emphasize how the creation of mankind in God's image is essential to the achieving of atonement. For if we are not free, then we have nothing for which to atone, nor can we

undo what we have done. If, however, we *are* free, then on the one hand, we are responsible, at fault, for our misdeeds; but on the other hand, we are also able to change, progress, and repent. We are created in the image of God: endowed with free will, with the awesome ability to fix our flaws, to change our course, to straighten what was made crooked. In other words, the two themes of Rosh Hashanah, judgement and repentance on the one hand and the greatness of man on the other, are to be taken in tandem, just as the respective symbolism of the two possible horns must always go hand in hand. Humble *teshuva*, contrite confession, remorseful repentance, is only possible because of the spiritual capacity that we have been granted by God.

Thus, in returning to free will as the Torah of Moses comes to a close, Moses himself returns to that which lies at the very origin of Judaism itself.

Speaking about how important free will is to Judaism, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks liked to quote Isaac Bashevis Singer, who famously said, "We have to believe in free will. We have no choice." But in a brilliant bit of homiletics, Rabbi Sacks interpreted the Almighty's instruction to Abraham, "*Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house,*" as a response to three modern influential individuals of Jewish descent: Marx, Spinoza and Freud. In Rabbi Sacks' words:

Marx said that human beings are determined by the play of economic forces, by class differences, by who owns land. Therefore God said to Abraham: *Lech lecha me'artzecha*—Leave the land. Spinoza said that human beings are determined by the circumstances of their birth, by what today we would call genetic instincts and therefore God said to Abraham: Leave *moledetecha*—the place of your birth. Freud said that human beings are determined by our early childhood experiences and therefore God said to Abraham: Leave your father's house.

Judaism's point, Rabbi Sacks continued, is that:

every attempt to reduce human behaviour to science or to pseudo-

science is a failure to understand the nature of human freedom, of human agency, of human responsibility. A failure to understand that what makes us human is that we have will, we have choice, we have creativity. Every single attempt—Socio-biological, genetic etc., and they are published by the hundred every single year—represents the failure to distinguish between a cause and an intention. Between phenomena whose causes lie in the past: those are scientific phenomena—and human behaviour, which is oriented towards the future. A future which only exists because I can imagine it and because I can imagine it I can choose to bring it about. That is in principle not subject to scientific causal analysis. And that is the root of human freedom. Because human beings are free—therefore we are not condemned to eternal recurrence. We can act differently today from the way we did yesterday—in small ways individually, in very big ways collectively. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world.

Thus, for Judaism, repentance is a triumph of the human spirit. God demands repentance of mankind, but God also has faith that mankind is capable of achieving it. Every step of the repentance process, from confessing and recognizing our past misdeeds to actually changing our ways, can only begin in the understanding of our capacities and through realizing that we have not lived up fully to those capacities. Moses, therefore, follows his discussion of repentance by emphasizing the moral capacity of humanity:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hidden from thee, neither is it far off...

But the word is very close to thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11,14)

A call to atonement is a call to examine ourselves, our moral capacity as human beings. We are meant to ask ourselves: what grade to we deserve? In understanding that we can do better, we are inspired to fashion a year of spiritual and moral growth; and may it be a year of blessing for us all.

Discussion Questions:

1. How might Rosh Hashanah's emphasis on both the themes of responsibility and mankind's moral capacity be applied to how we educate children? How has society fallen short in the way these concepts are addressed in the larger culture today?

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