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Believing in Change

A little over a year ago, I visited Berlin for the first time. It was my first trip, not only to Berlin, but also to any German city - and while I was there, I found myself thinking a lot about change.

As you will know if you've been to Berlin too, or even lived there, the city is covered in monuments reckoning with some of the darkest moments in its own history. One morning, on the relatively short walk from my hotel to the Jewish museum, I ran into four different Holocaust memorials. All of these memorials seemed to be asking: how can we commit to never again being the place out of which something like the Holocaust emerges?

As I walked, I also ran into marker after marker of former locations of the Berlin Wall - as well as multiple pieces of public art commemorating its fall. Part of what was so fascinating about this was that it wasn't always so obvious to me whether, on a given block, I was standing in the former East or West Berlin. In only a few decades, the city has knit itself back together to an incredible degree.

What does it take for a person or community to change for the better?

And what does it take for us to accept change in others, and encounter others on their own terms?

My short trip to Berlin was in some ways the culmination of a long internal journey. I am not the descendant of Holocaust survivors - my family got to this country a couple of decades before the war - but I grew up around a number of them, and as is the case for many of us in the Jewish community, my worldview has been profoundly shaped by the legacy and memory of the Holocaust. In my adult life, when I first met German citizens of my own generation who told me how serious their childhood Holocaust education had been and how seriously they and others in their lives took the idea of "never again," it was initially surprising for me. It flew in the face of assumptions I hadn't even known that I had.

And last summer in Berlin, I found myself realizing that I *still* had a lot of assumptions left to challenge. As I watched multicultural groups of friends wander the boulevards together, all chatting in German, against the backdrop of monuments to a fallen wall and memorials to the victims of a horrific genocide, two thoughts struck me in quick succession. The first one was: Hitler would have been stunned to see this city today. The second was: I need to try to encounter Berlin of the 21st century on its own terms, and even with years of preparation, that's going to be much more difficult than I thought.

What does it take to accept that a place, a person, or a group has changed? Or even – *can change*?

What does it take for us to ***believe*** in change?

Belief that people, and societies, can change, is in many ways the prerequisite to Yom Kippur.

Here we are, all together, all dressed up .. ready to fast, either by abstaining from food if that's healthy for us, or, perhaps, by abstaining from something else that distracts us from our highest goals and ideals in life ... Yom Kippur is dramatic. And it's not dramatic for the sake of drama, it's dramatic with purpose: to help us commit, or recommit, to positive change.

And it's not just positive change in our personal lives that we're here committing to, tonight! Yom Kippur is also about committing to taking up our responsibilities in our communities, our societies, and our world, to do our best to help repair the harm not just from wrongs we personally committed, but from wrongs we are aware of. To this end, in a few minutes, we will recite the Vidui, or collective confession, one of the core prayers of this holiday. We'll confess in the first personal plural – using the “we” voice, or the suffix “nu” in Hebrew – both to wrongs that we personally committed, and to many wrongs that we *haven't* personally committed, but that we know are being perpetrated in our wider society. One of the ideas of the Vidui is that we are taking responsibility, both for our own actions, and for the work of healing the wider world.

It's a pretty heavy responsibility.

Confession, in Jewish tradition, is not an end in and of itself. Confession is one of the early steps towards healing, and repair. And so to say these words, and mean them, is also to commit or recommit to trying to heal the injustices that we are naming. Put simply: saying the vidui presupposes a belief that positive change is possible, and that we can be part of it.

If I am being honest, on some days, that's pretty far from how I feel about the world and my place within it.

And yet, it's Yom Kippur, here we are, let's try.

Picture your life like a timeline. Do you have it in your head? The year you were born is the start, and then the timeline stretches forward, or up, until the present. Now start filling it in, first with really positive changes in the broader world. For example, very early in my timeline, only a few months in, is the fall of the Berlin Wall. Other events follow: the end of apartheid, the Good Friday agreement, the slow and ongoing healing of the hole in the ozone layer. LGBTQ rights improve dramatically here and in many parts of the world. Effective vaccines are found and disseminated to help combat a deadly pandemic in record time, using cutting edge technology.

Do you see it? Your timeline glowing with bright points of change? Good, now add to it – this time, pulling from your personal life. Maybe you want to add the moment you met a dear friend, or future love of your life; maybe you want to add the birth of a child. Maybe you want to add the moment you learned something that totally changed your worldview, or the day you achieved a lifelong dream, or saw the most beautiful ocean or mountain or forest that you've ever seen. Maybe it's the day you reconciled with someone you had a falling out with, or did something that scared you and got yourself to the other side. Maybe it's the day you or someone you love sought help for an addiction, or other health challenges, and began a process of healing.

Of course, many other types of events happen on all of our timelines too – some catastrophic, some heartbreaking, some mundane. Most of our timelines would defy linear notions of progress in some significant ways, on both personal and global levels. And it makes sense that the catastrophic, the heartbreaking, the frustrating, and even the mundane sometimes occupy our attention. This is very human; at times, it keeps us safe. Looked at one way, Yom Kippur is itself a day to focus on all that is broken, in our lives and in our world. However, Yom Kippur is not (only) a day of mourning ... it is also a day of mending. It is a day of believing in change.

So just for this moment, I'll invite you to hold your timelines in your minds, and let the moments of positive change in the world shine bright.

When we do this, sometimes, we can also begin to imagine brightness in our futures. Maybe it's our personal future, maybe it's that vast collective future beyond our lifetimes that we are all contributing to every day – maybe it's both.

What are the places in your life, and in our world, most in need of brightness?

And what would it mean for you to believe that positive change might be possible?

There's a remarkable story in the Talmud¹ of a person named Rabbi Meir, and his wife, a very wise woman named Bruriah. Rabbi Meir is really disturbed by the actions of people in his neighborhood that he calls "hooligans." So he prays for them to die. Bruriah hears him praying and rushes over. "What's wrong with you?" she says, "God doesn't want people who do the wrong thing to *die*. God wants them to live, and change! Pray for them to repent, and change. *That's* how wickedness will leave the earth."

So Rabbi Meir changes his prayer, and the "hooligans" live. And over time, they change.

This story is as enigmatic as it is compelling. One of the biggest questions it raises is this: *why* did Rabbi Meir initially want the "hooligans" to die?

One possibility, of course, is that Rabbi Meir wanted revenge. The hooligans were making his life hard. The Talmud says "they distressed him greatly." Maybe he wanted them to get what he thought they deserved.

But Bruriah's response, and the fact that it convinces Rabbi Meir to completely change his prayer, suggests another possibility. Is it possible ... that the idea that the hooligans could change, or more to the point, that his own situation could change while the "hooligans" were still living, just hadn't occurred to Rabbi Meir? That their death or disappearance was the only way he could imagine an end to his own distress?

For Rabbi Meir, believing that other people could change – or at least, choosing to act as though he did – made the difference between life and death.

What might acting as though *we* believed people and dynamics could change do for *us*?

¹ BT Berakhot 10a

How might we see our country differently, or our world?

How might we see our relationships?

How might we see ourselves?

For me, the story of Rabbi Meir and Bruriah and the hooligans who lived and changed their ways is a reminder not to give up – not to give up on myself, and not to give up on other people. It reminds me not to give up on our country, and our democracy ... even though that can feel challenging, some days. It reminds me not to give up on my connection to the global Jewish people, and to keep trying to find ways to learn from and work with the many Israelis and Palestinians who are trying, so hard, to envision and enact justice, safety and equality for all people in the land. Closer to home, trying on the idea that maybe, just maybe, positive change is possible, offers me a new way to approach dynamics within my relationships – and inside of myself – that I wish were different.

Not giving up doesn't mean "waiting and hoping a bad situation gets better." It means asking ourselves what it would look like to work for the changes we most hope to see – and then recommitting to doing that work.

Tomorrow morning, we will read in the Torah a famous instruction offered to our ancestors and to us: *u'v'charta ba'chayyim*.² Choose life. Choose blessing. And the Torah adds: *do this so that you and the people who come after you will live*.³

These words can be as perplexing as they are powerful. As much as Judaism places an incredibly high value on saving life, we all know that for each of us, life will have an end. And for each of us, there is much that is out of our control. And so it's not always possible to *literally* choose life.

Rather, on Yom Kippur, and every day, we are called by our tradition to contribute, as much as possible, to the *story* of life, for ourselves and other people. To make space for ourselves and other people to keep trying to change for the better, to keep trying to heal and grow and connect and be in relationship. We are called to do everything we can to contribute to this story, knowing that, as the rabbis taught, "it's not up to us to finish the work, but neither are we free to give up on it." This is what I think the Torah means when it calls us to choose life.

During my brief trip to Berlin last summer, one of the things I learned was how *long* it took for many of the changes I was witnessing to come to fruition.⁴ For decades after World War II, on both sides of the wall, multiple generations were raised without much education about their own ancestors' role in the holocaust.⁵ After reunification, this began to change, but it was and

² Deuteronomy 30:19. (The Reform movement reads portions of *Parshat Nitzavim* on Yom Kippur morning.)

³ *ibid*.

⁴ My first extended learning about this was at a temporary exhibition called "The Nazis didn't just disappear": Dealing with National Socialism in Germany since 1945," at the museum Topography of Terror. Topography of Terror is a history museum located on the square block that housed the Gestapo and SS headquarters during World War II.

⁵ There were different reasons for this on each side of the wall. East Berlin was part of USSR after the war, and so children were educated to identify with the allies when they learned about World War II (though this may not have

sometimes still is a bumpy process. Germany was and is still grappling with antisemitism and racism, including with sometimes violent manifestations. Healing and atonement have been long, slow, and not always linear.

And yet – they have been happening.

It took many decades and a lot of work, by a lot of people, for Berlin to become the city I visited last summer, the city that many of you have visited and some of you have lived in. Many people had to “choose life,” again and again, for themselves, their children, and their neighbors. Many people had to choose accountability, and “never again,” and many people need to keep choosing it, every day, for that choice to be meaningful.

Here and now, we are gathered together, faced with our own set of choices:

The choice to believe that positive change is possible, in our lives and in the world, the choice to notice the need for it, the choice to work for it.

Today and every day, our tradition calls on us to choose possibility, choose connection ... and choose life and blessing, for ourselves and for others, to the extent that we are able, our whole lives long.

been accurate to their own families’ histories). This meant that they were taught to see what the Nazis had done as wrong, but also to see the Nazis as “not us.” In West Berlin (and West Germany more broadly), many former Nazis returned to their work in a wide variety of fields (including education) within a few years of the war. This meant that it was not until their generation retired, in the 1980s, that narratives in and beyond educational spaces began to shift in substantial ways.