

Kol Nidre Sermon for 5768
By Rabbi Ethan Seidel

Among our most famous sages, none is more revered than R' Akiva. He lived at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century of the common era, right after the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70CE. I'd like to begin tonight by retelling a famous story about R' Akiva. It's a story that, frankly, I've never really cared much for.

Many of you may be familiar with it. This story is first found in the Talmud, (Ketubot 62b - 63a), and was probably written several hundred years after Akiva's death. In this story, Akiva is a shepherd for a wealthy man. This man's daughter, Rachel, notices that Akiva is, though but a shepherd and illiterate, a humble and good man. Rachel, though she is the daughter of a rich man, tells Akiva that she will marry him, but only on the condition that he study Torah. They marry, whereupon Rachel's rich father disowns them. Akiva then goes off to study for 12 years. At the end of those 12 years, Akiva comes back home, a scholar in his own right, with 12,000 disciples. However, before Akiva can say "Honey, I'm home!", he overhears someone castigating his wife: "How long are you going to live a virtual widow, Rachel?". To which Rachel replies: "Were it up to me, I'd tell him to study *another* 12 years!" Akiva turns on his heel and does just that. After 12 *more* years, he returns with even more glory, this time with 24,000 students; he dedicates all of his success to his long-suffering wife. Oh, and his father-in-law repents of his evil ways, and gives Akiva half his fortune.

As I said, this is not my favorite story. It's partly the exaggeration that puts me off: 24 years apart?? 24 *thousand* disciples?? The extreme separation of husband and wife also bothers me: it seems so harsh, and so unnecessary. There is one part of this story I *do* like: given my own personal history, I do like the theme of beginning to study Torah late in life. But I can't get over the impossible sacrifices that this story suggests are necessary. I hear this story saying to me: Sure, you can become a scholar, even if you never studied our tradition as a child; just be prepared to forsake your family for 24 years. So this is not my favorite Talmudic story.

Now, some of you may know that this is not the only story about R' Akiva's beginnings. There's another story, one which I find much more inspiring. It's got the theme I like about coming to Torah at a later age, just like the story I just told you. And it's also prescribes a much less punishing course of study.

This story begins with R' Akiva 40 years old and completely illiterate. One day in his 40th year he found himself at a spring, wondering why the rock surrounding the spring was carved the way it was. He asked those around the spring, and they told him: it was water, falling drop by drop, over many years, that had etched the stone. Immediately, Akiva - illiterate, but sensitive - drew an analogy to himself: if water, which is soft, can hollow out rock, then how much more so can Torah, which is strong as iron, shape my heart? Akiva decided to change his life - he took his son and went to an elementary class to learn the aleph bet. Eventually, after much study, Akiva became the preeminent sage of his time.

I like this story. It might even be historically accurate, given how early it was recorded: it's found in a book called Avot D'Rabbi Natan (chapter 6) which was probably written less than 50 years after Akiva's death. In this version of the story, we have the promise that study, even late in life, will bear unexpected fruit. But we *don't* have the enforced separation of husband and wife as in the first story I recounted. In fact, given that Akiva begins his studies *with* his son, the story may be showing us that Torah study can unite, rather than separate, a family. Just the

opposite message of that first version I told you. My own teacher, Eliezer Diamond, has noted how later Rabbinic stories often tend towards a more severe asceticism than earlier Rabbinic stories, even when they're telling similar tales.

What draws me most about the second story I told is its vivid image of perseverance. The steady drip of water against stone likened to the steady influence of study. The idea that gentleness, if applied consistently, could change the hardest object. It's both a hopeful and, at least for me, a believable metaphor for life.

This story about R' Akiva, and his revelation at the well, has been in my mind recently. I think that's because the teaching of this story fit in nicely with what another of my teachers, Ed Newman has taught me. Ed Newman, is my piano teacher. Well, maybe that's a bit of an overstatement - in truth, I have not had many lessons with him over the years, because I seem to have too many hobbies to concentrate on any one sufficiently. I think I only had two lessons this year - they were in preparation for a concert I performed in that was part of the Spring Fling this past March.

Anyway, I want to share some of Ed's teaching with you. I was having problems, as almost every serious musician does, with repetitive motion pain. Anyone who does the same motion for hours a day - whether it's typing on the computer, or playing the piano, or playing the guitar, or violin - anyone who repeats motions so much has to be extremely careful. This spring, as I prepared for the Spring Fling concert, my wrists began hurting again, as they had for years when I was a student at Oberlin Conservatory. Since I'd graduated the Conservatory and stopped playing so much, some 25 years ago, my wrists had gradually healed, and I had forgotten all about the pain. This spring, when the old familiar pain returned, it was a real psychological blow for me: I felt hopeless.

Fortunately, my teacher, Ed Newman, had the just the right story to tell me. He had had an intensely painful episode of his own: what he called carpal tunnel pain not long before. He'd been working doing something repetitive in his garden, I believe it was, and the next day, his wrists were extremely painful. What did he do? Here's what he did, and what constituted his advice to me: Gently force the issue. Gently force the issue. Emphasis on both gentleness, *and* perseverance. He gently moved his wrists just a bit at a time, working them until they hurt just a bit, and then he relaxed. He didn't give up, he didn't shrink from a little pain, but neither did he push things too hard. It took some work, but he got his wrists back pain-free fairly quickly.

Now, before I go farther, *please* don't think that I'm offering any simplistic medical advice, today. I'm no doctor, and of course I recommend that you visit your physician when you find yourself confronting some new pain. That should go without saying. Today, however, I'm talking about *old* pains. The kinds of pains that you have already brought to a doctor, but for which you have yet to find much relief.

As one gets older, one tends to have a goodly number of such pains. The aches tend to get better for a while, and then worse again for awhile, and then again better, with no clear rhyme or reason. Whenever there's a new addition to *my* universe of pain, I always go to the doctor. I have some tests that have until now, thank God, always ruled out anything really bad. But these visits have rarely provided any relief. My knees and my back have been bothering me for years. Sometimes I'll hit on an exercise that will help, at least for awhile, but I know I'm not likely to find any permanent solution.

Anyway, after this piano lesson, and my teacher's advice, I began to realize that there was a different way to approach this whole issue of chronic pain. Bicycling back from Virginia,

where Ed lives, I tried something different. Given my chronic knee pain, my usual bicycling speed is very slow. Heavy, middle-aged ladies regularly pass me - not that that should bother me, of course. Because my knees are so prone to soreness, I'd giving up pushing to go faster. In fact, on those charts that tell you how many calories you burn at different bicycling speeds, my average speed isn't even listed.

Anyway, I decided to push it a bit coming home. Not a lot. Very, very gently. Constantly monitoring my knees for too much pain, and backing way off the instant it felt like too much. I've biked that way for the last 6 months. I'm still passed by everyone and their mother, but the knees are feeling much better. Maybe it's just because I'm feeling a little more in control, like I've got a plan. But I think I'm feeling better also because my plan is better. I'm gently forcing the issue. I'm not giving up. I'm not expecting too much - but I am expecting something.

I've gone on, perhaps a little too long about my knees, because I believe that this subject: perseverance, gently forcing the issue, is a crucial aspect of teshuva. The concept I'm trying to explain tonight is not just about *physically* pressing the issue. It's about getting ourselves to a better place spiritually as well. Like water dripping on rock, we have the potential to move mountains. Not quickly, not easily, not painlessly. But slowly, gently, relentlessly, we can make a difference in ourselves, and the world around us.

Here's an example from the realm of the spirit. Do you ever begin these Days of Awe with a list of resolutions that's not very different from *last* year's list of resolutions? Who hasn't approached these days of awe with the exact same plans for change as they had the previous year? And the year before that. And the year before that. Maybe we're trying for too much. Maybe we're trying to force the issue too radically. Maybe if we made our goals a little more gradual this year. Instead of going into each new year with the same large goal, and getting nowhere, what if we took a small, doable piece of our usual goal, and made *that* our hope for teshuva in the coming year. Maybe it's time to give up the big goal, and try for something a little more manageable this year. I'm not talking about giving up the larger goal altogether, I'm talking about forcing the issue a little more gently.

I find that this approach often works with children. In fact, I think that perseverance is one of a parents most powerful tools. Of course, nothing *always* works with children. As I've remarked many times, God, for his own inscrutable reasons, has given children free will; as long as our community's children continue to have free will, nothing we do can be *guaranteed* to succeed with them. They are free to reject our best efforts. But that doesn't mean we have no influence at all. The power of perseverance should not be minimized.

Now, by perseverance, I don't mean nagging, though the two can in fact appear quite similar. By perseverance, I'm thinking of something more gentle, and patient, and loving, than nagging.

Here's what I mean by nagging:

"Moshe, for the 1000th time, eat those carrots! I don't know how many times I have to tell you this!"

Such a parental outburst has impatience written all over it. For one thing, we all know how many times the parent will have to tell the child this. Many, many times. Civilizing children, takes endless patience. If you're going to be freshly angered each time you must remind a child to eat hisr vegetables, that's going to make life miserable for both you and your child. And what's more, when a child senses impatience, it's kind of like when a shark senses blood. The kid knows that it's only a matter of time till he gets his way.

Allow me to suggest a more gentle approach, similar to, but, I like to believe, clearly distinguishable from nagging:

“Moshe, sweetie, you know if you don’t eat at least a bite of those carrots, there’s no dessert for you tonight.”

Note the lack of impatience. The gentle, even wistful attitude. “I *wish* I could let you have dessert, I really do.” And if the child responds to your gentle nudge with an outburst, you remain calm, like the water R’ Akiva saw at the spring: “I’m not going to argue about it any more, sweetie, you know the rules.” If things get really hot, and the child will not give up the fight, there is always: “If I hear another word about the carrots, you will get no dessert tonight.”

Many nights, those carrots will go untasted, as will dessert on those nights. It may take years for a child to get in the habit of eating those vegetables. Actually, my experience is that it *will* take years. But my experience is also that it *will* happen. It will be an extremely gradual process, learning to appreciate new tastes, and learning to eat a healthy, balanced diet. But all of growing up is like this. It takes a long time, and it takes parents with unlimited patience, gently forcing whatever the issue is: whether it’s trying new foods, or taking responsibility for homework, or saying thank you, or practicing for a bar mitzvah.

Now, I don’t want to give you the idea that I’m some perfect patient Dad. I have crossed the line into nagging many times, as I’m sure my children can attest. I’m not always gentle. And there are times where the kids have worn me down - I’m not always persistent. No one, especially no parent, is perfect. Fortunately, we are not called to perfection, and getting it right most of the time is good enough.

Now, not all of us have kids. But I’ve presented this little example not just as a teaching tool for child-rearing. We can use this concept also be a reminder to ourselves, for our *own* teshuva. Have we become unpleasant nags with regards to ourselves? Sometimes, especially at this time of year, we can be really hard on ourselves, really nasty to ourselves.. Sometimes, the things we say to ourselves would qualify us as abusers, were we to treat our children, or *anyone* else that harshly.

“I can’t believe I’m eating another helping of that dessert. I’m such a pig.”

“I still don’t have the courage even to hint to my boss that this assignment is unfair. I’ll never amount to anything in this job, and I don’t have the guts to move on. I’m a complete coward;”

“Why do I let my spouse’s anger get to me? Why can’t I just listen? Instead of helping, I just feel hurt and lash out. I’m such a rotten husband.”

Note that, in the examples I just dramatized, it’s not the observation that’s abusive, it’s the name calling at the end of the observation: “I’m a pig, I’m a coward, I’m a rotten spouse.” Such name calling implies that we are who we are, and we can never change, not even a little bit. We would be rightfully appalled if someone said to a child: “You’ll *never* learn.” Not that I’ve never heard that. But if try not to treat children that way, shouldn’t we also refrain from treating *ourselves* so unforgivingly? As we should be with children, so should we be with ourselves: gentle, patient, but also persistent. Perhaps, this year, as you plan your repentance, a little more gentleness with yourself, and a little more patience with yourself is in order. You may even find such an approach more productive.

There is another lesson I want to share with you tonight, courtesy of my piano teacher. I haven’t actually told you yet what he prescribed for my wrist pain. The issue, he felt, is flexibility. I play with my wrists mostly immobile - whether I learned that way, or it’s a bad

habit I developed, I don't know. But the fact is, any joint that isn't free to find its natural position, that is locked into place, independent of what that joint is called to do - any joint so immobilized will start to hurt after much use. The bottom line for me is that, if I'm to get rid of my wrist pain, I'm going to have to relearn my hand position - not a small task.

Flexibility is, of course, a much bigger issue than a pianist's hand position. In fact, it's one of the central issues of our lives. For example: As we work on ourselves this time of year, gently nudging ourselves in the right direction, flexibility is key. For we don't know what this new year will bring. It could bring professional success, but, God forbid, private tragedy. Or vice versa. This new year may well bring things we could never have imagined. We don't know what opportunities will open for us. And depending on what happens this year, not every goal of we contemplate tonight is going to be realizable this year. If we are to do teshuva, we cannot rely on persistence alone; we must also be gentle with ourselves, flexible in our demands upon ourselves. And, if we're *really* flexible, during this year, we may be able to seize on opportunities that we had never expected, and so do teshuva that we had never planned.

To return to child rearing for a moment. Flexibility is, of course, a huge asset in the arsenal of a parent. Though flexibility, of course, has to itself be employed flexibly. There are times to be *inflexible*, and there are times to relax. Children need some limits that are strict, but parents also must know when to back off a little. It comes back to gently forcing the issue: the gentle parent knows when to force the issue, and when such forcing is counterproductive. Ideally, at least. As I mentioned already, no parent gets it right all the time. But the theme of this drash is partly that you don't *need* to get it right all the time. Getting it right *most* of the time is plenty good enough, if you are persistent.

When I think of persistence in the parent/child relationship, I think of the relationship between God and Moshe. As you know, Moshe is about the *most* reluctant prophet you could imagine. God had to be *relentless* to get Moshe to return to Egypt and lead us to freedom. God shows him four separate miracles - the burning bush, Moses' staff turning into a snake, Moses' hand afflicted with scales, and then healed, and then the water turning into blood. None of it seemed to impress Moses. After all the miracles, and the persuading, and cajoling, Moses never actually agrees to the task. Moses never says: "Ok God, fine, I'll go and help the Israelites who are suffering in Egypt." Moses' final word in this argument, after God has ground down all Moses' resistance is (Exodus 4:13):

Please, My Lord, send whomever you want to send.

בִּי אֲדֹנָי, שְׁלַח־נָא בְּיַד־תַּשְׁלַח:

At which point, God does finally get angry. Like any parent, God loses it occasionally - He's entitled. However, God does not give up on Moses. God enlists Aharon in the plan, but Moses, even though Moses has never explicitly agreed to cooperate, is never let off the hook. God doesn't take no for an answer. God takes an extremely qualified yes, "send whomever you want to send", and is ok with it. That's persistence.

That's God. For where does our impetus to repent come from? Partly from tradition, of course. But it's more than that. Tradition only helps direct ourselves towards God. It's God that is always urging us. We may block out the call to repent, but, especially at this time of year, when tradition amplifies God's call, we cannot totally ignore it. You'd think God might have given up on us. But no. God is persistent with us, as He was with Moshe. The job we have to do is always set before us.

I want to close with something in a bit of a lighter vein. It's a cartoon by David Sipress that I saw in the New Yorker just last month (August 20, 2007, p.49). A man and a woman are leaving a building, holding rolled up mats in their left hands. There's a sign on the building that

reads: “Life Spirit Meditation Center”. So the couple is leaving the building, and the woman is rolling her eyes with a hopeless expression on her face. The man is saying to her, with an unpleasantly confident expression on his face: “As far as I can tell, meditation is just worrying minus the content.”

It’s a funny cartoon, and, like most good jokes, it’s quite close to the truth. Meditation - at least the mindfulness meditation that I practice daily, *is* like worrying without the content. You sit and focus on your breathing, and as worries come into your head, as they inevitably do, you gently push the worries to the side. But the worries come back, or new worries come to take their place. Your job is push them to the side as well: gently, and persistently.

I won’t lie to you - there are days when during my meditation I spend lots more time worrying, than focusing on my breathing. There are even times when I’m so distracted by worries that I give up in the middle, and I can’t bear to sit for the 20 minutes I allot myself each morning. There are times for me, as there is for everyone, when frustration wins out, and I can’t be the gentle, persistent person I’d like to be.

My meditation failures used to bother me. They still happen, with some regularity, but they’ve come to bother me less and less. I used to think that my inability to sit for 20 minutes and meditate was a failure of perseverance. Which it surely is. Like my failure, each year, to make good on all my teshuva resolutions. However, on a higher level, I realize that I *am* very much a persistent person. Each morning, I try again to meditate, and most mornings, I do it.

Similarly, each year, I concentrate on teshuva, regardless of the success or failure of the previous year’s resolutions. I’m here. We’re here together. We’re not giving up. That alone spells perseverance in my book. Perhaps, all we lack, you and me, is gentleness. A little flexibility. Perhaps if we were more open to doing less than we’d hoped this year, we would see our struggle as the success it really is. And maybe, if the circumstances were to present themselves, and we were open to doing things we hadn’t dreamed of, we could see that also as success, whatever else didn’t get done.

Call it a “meta-resolution” - a resolution about resolutions. A plan to be kind to ourselves, as long as we are also persistent in our efforts to better ourselves. A plan to be flexible: to back off if the time is right, *or*, to to jump in energetically if opportunity knocks. I’ve seen it work with kids. We see in the Torah how God’s persistence and patience brought Moses to the right place. I pray that these qualities of gentleness and perseverance and flexibility work also for us, as we strive to be better servants of the Holy one in the coming year. G’mar hatimah tovah.