

"Three Steps to a Better You"
דבר תורה (sermon) for Kol Nidre 5779/2018
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"Lord, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am." This is a prayer that can be found on a lot of [coffee mugs, tee-shirts, magnets](#),¹ and lots of church signs. It's a nice sentiment, isn't it. But the truth is, it's probably a dangerous sentiment as well. Sometimes setting impossible goals is counterproductive because it leads to a sense of the impossibility of the task and often tempts us to give up. I imagine that this sentiment is one of the reasons why we open the Yom Kippur prayers with Kol Nidre, a formula to annul vows. The Machzor is telling us that even as we set our minds to the task of self-improvement, it is important that we not over-commit.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about how, rather than setting unreasonable goals that we will only to regret next Yom Kippur, we can try to set and meet reasonable goals for the coming year. Now, I lack the wisdom to write pithy self-help books, so instead I'm turning to organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich and several videos of hers I found on the internet. I'll be focusing on her Ted Talk video titled "Learning to be Awesome at Anything You Do, Including Being a Leader,"² together with the classical Jewish sources that reflect similar ideas to Dr. Eurich's. Dr. Eurich proposes a three-step process for how to become more awesome. They are (1) Know thyself; (2) pick one thing; and (3) practice daily.³

Step one: Know thyself. This is trickier than you might think. As Dr. Eurich points out, people are generally poor judges of themselves, and what's worse, they don't even know it.⁴ In a separate video, Dr. Eurich talks about being "self-aware," which she describes as, "the ability to see ourselves clearly, to understand who we are, how others see us and how we fit into the world."⁵ Dr. Eurich says:

My team has found that 95% of people think they're self-aware, but the real number is closer to 10 to 15%. You know what this means, don't you? It

¹ Please note, hyperlink is to Amazon using the Union For Traditional Judaism partner code. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVPxmz_PvUw. For more on Dr. Eurich, see her book [Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life](#). See footnote 1 for a note on this Amazon hyperlink.

³ [Id.](#)

⁴ [Id.](#)

⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha_eurich_increase_your_self_awareness_with_one_simple_fix, transcript at https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha_eurich_increase_your_self_awareness_with_one_simple_fix/transcript.

means that on a good day - on a good day - 80% of us are lying to ourselves about whether we're lying to ourselves.⁶

So, what do we need to do in order to be more self-aware? In her video titled "3 strategies for becoming more self-aware," Dr. Eurich makes three suggestions: (1) commit to wanting to know the truth; (2) get more feedback; and (3) a third thing that I'll be focusing on tomorrow and I don't want to ruin the surprise.⁷

The focus of the Yom Kippur davening is admitting our own faults. Though we say many words of confession, we often just mouth the words rather than considering whether and how these sentiments apply to us. In our confessions of sins, we refer to "את ההגלויים לנו את שאינם גלויים לנו" those that are known to us, and those that are unknown to us." Through this phrase, we recognize that we have faults that we haven't begun to admit to ourselves. We need to be committed to knowing the extent of our own failings. Dr. Eurich talks about getting more feedback. She explains that other people often understand ourselves better than we do. But we are almost always reticent to actually hear the truth when others are critical of us, let alone to actually solicit that criticism from others. The book of Proverbs says, "אַל תּוֹכַח לְיֹצֵאן וְיִשְׂנֹאֲךָ הוֹכַח לְחַכָּם וַיֵּאֱהָבֶךָ" rebuke not the scoffer lest he hate you, rebuke the wise person and he will love you."⁸ Our challenge is to be the wise person in that verse. We need to be solicitous of corrective advice from others and we need to create an environment in which people are comfortable sharing their criticisms of us. We need to ask ourselves and others what we are getting wrong and what we could do better. Most importantly, we must work on accepting those criticisms as true. Speaking of which, if you have any complaints about this sermon ... well ... no ... let me rethink that ... I'll get back to you.

Next, Dr. Eurich advises us to pick one thing to improve on and to work on improving only that one thing.⁹ This is important, because it's almost impossible to focus on improving more than one thing at a time. As we've mentioned, this is one of the central messages we can learn by starting off Yom Kippur with reciting Kol Nidre. Dr. Eurich suggests that we make a list of the things about ourselves that we would like to improve and then consider how much more "awesome" we would be if we improved on each thing. She suggests we start working on the one thing that would result in the most

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Video of Dr. Eurich is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyQlx2p7Qe8>. For the sermon I delivered the next day, see <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/asking-constructive-questions/>.

⁸ Proverbs 9:8.

⁹ "Learning to be awesome at anything you do, including being a leader" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVPxmz_PvUw.

improvement.¹⁰ I would suggest, however, that there might be some goals that are more easily achievable that maybe should be taken on first. So maybe one has to think both in terms of the one area of improvement that is most likely to result in the greatest improvement.

Rabbinic thought certainly agrees that any one improvement that we can make in ourselves can be of monumental importance. In the Mishnah, Rabbi Hananyah ben Akashia states that, "רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות,"¹¹ and therefore gave them much Torah and mitzvot," indicating that every one mitzvah could be the tipping point to earn a person an overall positive evaluation in God's eyes. Rambam teaches that every individual should see him or herself and the entire world as if he or she and the world were right on the brink between being judged positively or negatively by God, such that a single sin could cause the individual and/or the whole world to be liable for destruction and a single mitzvah could bring salvation and rescue for the individual or the whole world.¹²

Dr. Eurich finishes with a third very important piece of advice. She says, "practice daily." She says we have "delusional development, the futile hope that just by wanting to get better at something you will, as if by osmosis." Dr. Eurich notes that for a long time people thought that most of our talents were inborn. For instance, people thought that the best marathon runners were born that way. However, the consensus now is that the best marathon runners are the ones that train the most effectively. Therefore, Dr. Eurich talks about how important it is to think about what we are trying to improve on a daily basis and to work on putting that resolution into action each and every day. She says we should make a plan each day for realizing our goal and at the end of the day analyze how we did that day and how we might build on our work the next day.¹³

Judaism very much believes in this philosophy of practicing daily. The very essence of Jewish ritual observance is the constant calls for us to remember who we are and what God expects of us. There is a famous debate among rabbis about what verse

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Makkot 3:16 (BT Makkot 23b). The context of this statement, the Mishnah in Makkot, demonstrates that לזכות should be read in the sense of judging positively, not merely conferring merit.

¹² רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ג
לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כאלו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב, וכן כל העולם חציו זכאי וחציו חייב, חטא חטא אחד הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף חובה וגרם לו השחתה, עשה מצוה אחת הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף זכות וגרם לו ולהם תשועה והצלה

¹³ "Learning to be awesome at anything you do, including being a leader"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVPxmz_PvUw.

of Torah, if any, best summarizes the Torah. Ben Zoma says it is the Shema. Ben Nanas says it is "love thy fellow as thyself." Ben Pazi, however, says he's found an even more essential verse, "אֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ אֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֹּקֶר וְאֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים," bring the first lamb in the morning and the second lamb in the evening," a reference to the commandment of daily offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁴ The message Ben Pazi brings to us, from this seemingly simple verse, is an important one – that the loftiest goals and the purest of intentions are meaningless unless one is able to implement them consistently. In the Temple, it was bringing a sacrifice each morning and evening. For Dr. Eurich, it is reflecting on the day's goals each morning and reviewing how we did at the end of the day. The two concepts converge on the concept of daily prayer, which we can use in the morning to focus our attention for the day ahead on how we will move toward self-improvement and in the evening to consider whether we succeeded and how we might improve on our successes or correct our direction where we fell short.

How will you achieve your goals this year? Wait, check that. How will you achieve your *goal* this year. For the moment, let's just think about one, because we are not going to wake up tomorrow and find ourselves to be the person our dogs think we are. But maybe we can go to sleep each night being a little bit better of a person than we were when we woke up that morning. Know thyself. Realize your faults, but be aware of your potential to improve. Choose one thing. Find the one area where you achieve the most improvement. Don't stop there, your job is not done. In fact, your job may never be done. Your job today, and each day for the rest of your life, is to practice daily being a better person than you were the day before. I wish everyone a year of continued growth and realization of your greatest aspirations.

FOR CLOSING PRAYER AT CONCLUSION OF SERVICE:

Dear God, we are not so brazen nor so stiff necked as to claim we are righteous and without sin. As we say numerous times on Yom Kippur, "אבל אנחנו חטאנו, verily we have sinned."

¹⁴ Numbers 28:4.

נחלת יעקב שמות פרק כה
ואגב אפרש דברי המדרש שהובא בעין יעקב בהקדמת הכותב, וז"ל: בן זומא אומר מצינו פסוק כולל, והוא: שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד. בן ננס אומר מצינו פסוק כולל יותר, והוא: ואהבת לרעך כמוך. ר' שמעון בן פזי אומר מצינו פסוק כולל יותר, והוא: את הכבש האחד תעשה בבוקר. עמד ר"פ על רגליו ואמר הלכה כבן פזי משום שנאמר ככל אשר אני מראה אותך בהר וגו' וכן תעשו עכ"ל המדרש, והוא תמוה למעין וכל הרואה משתומם. ובעזה"י אפרשו באר היטב.

“את הגלויים לנו ואת שאינם גלויים לנו” there are those sins that are known to us, and those that are unknown to us. As to those we are aware of, we ask your forgiveness and your inspiration to change. As to those we are unaware of, teach us the humility to realize them and even to invite others to help us find them. Grant us the wisdom to identify the area where we can achieve the most improvement.

Just as You commanded in Your Torah that a lamb be brought every evening and morning, and that Shema be recited upon our going to sleep and upon our awaking, teach us to use the regular rituals prescribed by your Torah to focus our vigilance on our goal of improvement. Teach us to turn to you every evening and every morning, so that each evening as we lie on our beds we may do so as better people than the people turned toward you just that morning.

“יהיו לרצון אמרי פי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יְקֻנֶה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי” May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be pleasing before you, my rock and my redeemer.” And may those words and meditations lead us to deeds that are even more pleasing before You.