

THE OY! AND THE YO!
TURNING A PROBLEM INTO AN OPPORTUNITY
Kol Nidre
October 11, 2016 ☆ 10 Tishri 5777

Recently, Sandy and I were at Barnes and Noble's with the grandchildren. The boys were looking for toys in the Lego section; Sandy was looking at children's story books and I was at the coffee shop working on a problem: writing a Yom Kippur sermon.

Sandy walked over, handed me a book and said, "Here is your sermon." It was a children's story entitled, "What Do You do With A Problem?" I'd like to read part of it to you:

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A PROBLEM?
A story by Kobi Yamada

...one day I had a problem.
I didn't want it. I didn't ask for it.
...but it was there.

....

I shooed it. I scowled at it. I tried ignoring it.
But nothing worked.

I started to worry about my problem.

....

And the more I worried, the bigger my problem became.

I tried everything I could to hide from it.
I even found ways to disguise myself.
But it still found me.

And the more I avoided my problem,
the more I saw it everywhere.

....

I couldn't take it anymore. "This has to stop!" I declared.
Maybe I was making my problem bigger and scarier
than it actually was.

...I had to face it.

So even though I didn't want to, even though I was really afraid, I got ready and I tackled my problem!

When I got face-to-face with it, I discovered something. My problem wasn't what I thought it was.

....

My problem held an opportunity!
It was an opportunity for me to learn and to grow.

....

It showed me that it was important to look closely because some opportunities only come once.

So now I see problems differently.
I'm not afraid of them anymore,
because I know their secret...

Every problem has an opportunity for something good. You just have to look for it.

Dictionaries define the word "problem" variously as "something difficult; a situation regarded as unwelcome or harmful; a source of trouble and worry; or a statement requiring a solution by means of a mathematical operation."

Many Jews have excelled at solving mathematical problems and have given us breakthroughs in diverse branches of science. But I am not talking here about mathematics or science. I am talking about the kind of human problems where there are no perfect answers. Niels Bohr, a famous Jewish scientist, said that in mathematics the opposite of a "correct answer" is a "wrong answer;" but in the sum of life, the opposite of a "profound truth" may be "another profound truth."

We all have problems. In Hebrew, the word for problem, *ba'ayah*, also means, a "question."

Another famous Jewish scientist, Isadore Rabi, recalls that when he was growing up, each day upon returning home from school, his mother would not ask him, "Izzi, what did you learn today?", but, "Izzi, what good questions did you ask today."

To be a Jew is to see life as a question, a problem, a puzzle to be solved. Each of us has a part of the answer, a piece of the puzzle. We need the presence, the support and help of others, to address the problem, to complete the puzzle.

But not all problems can be solved; some problems might just be able to be managed. Some spaces in our lives remain open, without the missing piece of the puzzle. Loss and pain are ever-present realities in our lives.

In the business of being human, the solution to the problem is often not in the answer but in asking the right question, in engaging the problem. And often, the answer to a question presents itself as another question. Maturity leads to the realization that life is lived more often in the ambiguity of unanswered questions than in the certainty of unquestioned answers.

Yom Kippur is a time for asking questions, a time for grappling with problems, with the empty spaces of our life's puzzle. Tonight, we come together to find strength in the circle of family and community, to find comfort in the beauty of our music and traditions, to feel safe in this sanctuary of the spirit.

But even as we come together, we recognize that each of us has problems no one else confronts; each of us has special hopes and dreams; unique worries and questions. Each of us has a prayer no one else can utter. Each of us feels a joy and has regrets which others cannot know (Sidney Greenberg, adapted).

The problems we face are of various kinds: personal, interpersonal, societal and global. What keeps us from confronting our problems even when we can't ignore them or avoid them, even when they keep getting bigger and bigger, ruining our sleep – is fear.

Fear makes us recoil; it pushes our defensive buttons; it makes us distrust others. The basic animal response to fear is fight and flight. We escape or we attack.

Research at the Institute for Bio-Cultural Study of Religion at Boston University has shown that "one-third to one-half of human beings seem genetically predisposed toward emphasizing the danger of threats over the possibilities of new experiences" (Forward, 9/6/16). We are wired and from early on, trained to be suspicious, fearful ("don't talk to strangers"). Anger and raw emotion surge naturally.

But we also have the capacity to step back, to reflect on options and move forward. When we are open to attacks from lions and bears, fight and flight make sense. But our problems are not lions and bears; they are loss, pain and difficulty. We can't run away.

At its best, religion is an antidote to fear. The most oft-repeated assurance in the Bible is *Al Tirah* – "do not be afraid, because I am with you." "I am here" is God's most reassuring response. When we visit a person in pain, at a time of loss, we do not come to offer answers or explanations, we come to offer our presence, our care, our love, to say, "here I am."

To effect *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world, we must first engage in *Tikkun Hanefesh* – the repair of self.

At a personal level, fear is our worst enemy. We fear not being loved, loneliness. We fear failing; embarrassment. We fear confronting our fears and acknowledging that we are vulnerable, that we are after all, human.

Because of personal fears we develop interpersonal fear. We distance ourselves from others. We fear showing emotion: we want to appear strong. We fear being rejected, and in the fear of abandonment, we build emotional walls that fail to protect us and isolate us even more.

Personal and interpersonal fears writ large are reflected in social conflict and violence, locally and globally. The fabric of our nation is being rent apart by the fears that result from individuals or groups thinking of themselves as not only different, which is good, but better and superior, which is damaging and dangerous. Others cannot be trusted; they do not know our story, share our concerns. They don't understand us; they want to hurt, destroy us.

Defensiveness escalates; mistrust widens. The result is more fear. Harsh words are flung carelessly. Words turn to blows and blows to weapons. The opponent is no longer simply someone who is different, with whom we may disagree, but somebody who is wrong, so wrong that he or she is evil. And not only evil in our sight, but in the sight of God. Thus demonized, the other is deprived of intrinsic human worth and privilege.

As Americans we are challenged at this season to address the problem of "fear." A recent national poll indicates that voters are "more motivated by fear about the other side claiming the White House than by excitement about their own candidate prevailing" (USA Today, 9/1/2016). The economy, immigration, health care, security, education, rather than social problems to address constructively and programmatically, have become political wedges – divisive, fearful, polarizing concerns.

The word "problem," in addition to being "a question for consideration or discussion," has a secondary meaning. In the original Greek, *problema* can mean "a fence, a barrier." We seem to prefer the latter definition.

We often treat our problems as barriers rather than questions. As Jews we face problems of education, demography; of meaning and identity. How do we develop meaningful expressions of identity to keep our youth engaged in our culture and religion while living in a multi-cultural, multi-choice society? How do we create community without fences and barriers, communities of inclusion without exclusivity, of pride without chauvinism?

How do we respond to external problems: the growing anti-semitism that is making many young Jews feel uncomfortable and excluded on some campuses? How do we make common cause with the valid claims of injustice facing African-Americans and Muslim minorities, while at the same time calling out the overt anti-Zionism and not so nuanced anti-semitism of many groups who also struggle for justice?

How do we support the State of Israel without ignoring its discriminatory policies against non-orthodox expressions of Judaism, against women in religion and minorities? How do we encourage a peace process leading to a two-state solution, which is still the best option for Israelis and Palestinians? How do we assert Israel's right to defend herself without abdicating her quest for peace? How does Israel affirm its natural, historic right to be *K'hol Hagoyim* – like other nations of the world, not judged by a different standard; and yet cultivate a commitment to the prophetic ideal to be *Or La'goyim* a "light unto the nations," a model of ethical nationhood?

Elie Wiesel, who died this past year, reminds us: "To be a Jew...is to ask a question – a thousand questions, yet always the same – of society, of others, of oneself,...of God. To be a Jew today,...means to testify, to bear witness.... [it] is first to accept [our] destiny, and then to choose it."

Yom Kippur is our annual appointment with destiny, our appointment with possibility. On this day we acknowledge that being human, being Jewish, is not only a condition or a problem, but an opportunity, a choice.

When our ancestor Jacob prepares to meet his brother Esau, from whom he had become alienated since boyhood, the Torah tells us that Jacob is "greatly afraid" (*Vayirah Ya'acov* – Gen 32:8). That night Jacob dreams of a struggle with a divine messenger. He emerges wounded from the experience, but ready to move forward, to reconcile himself with his brother, to win responsibility. Jacob's name is changed to "Israel," the one who struggles, who makes choices, who sees possibilities where others see barriers. He moves from fear, to resolve. He is ready to address the problem, to seize the opportunity.

Sandy recently brought to my attention a quote from the story of "The Wright Brothers," by David McCullough: "No bird soars in a calm." It was an entry made by Wilbur Wright into his diary in the year 1900; a purely scientific, objective observation on the patterns of birds in flight. "No bird soars in a calm!"

It is often when buffeted by the winds and tested by adversity that we meet our true selves and are able to rise above even our own expectations of ourselves.

Israel's former President and Prime Minister, Shimon Peres (z"l – of blessed memory), even though he occupied many important positions in government, was not a successful politician. He lost many elections and was often overshadowed by his rival, Yitzhak Rabin. Yet Peres endured and endeared himself, living to be the last of Israel's founding fathers and luminaries until his death just before this Rosh Hashanah. Peres understood that failure is something to overcome rather than to brood over; to engage rather than let it define you.

- He said: "Optimists and pessimists die the exact same death, [yet] they live very different lives."
- He proposed that "when you have two alternatives, the first thing you have to do is look for the third."
- He believed that "we should use our imagination more than our memory."
That
"It is better to dream than to remember."
- Peres reminded us that "there are two things that cannot be achieved unless you close your eyes a little: love and peace. If you want perfection, you won't obtain either of them."

In tribute to Shimon Peres' legacy, let us ask ourselves:

- How will we deal with the opportunities that arise from problems?
- How will we seize the possibility hidden in a difficult situation?
- How will we live with problems we cannot solve but just manage?
- With questions we cannot fully answer?
- What will we choose to remember?
- What will we dare to dream and imagine?

Rabbi Shelley Goldman recently brought to my attention a large sculpture installed on the waterfront of Brooklyn Bridge Park. As you cross the bridge, from one side of the waterfront, the sculpture reads **OY!** From the other side, it reads **YO!**

When life's **OY's!** come, as they inevitably will, let us respond to them with an affirmative, **YO!** Let us move on with the wisdom of the children's story with which I began –

"...I discovered...[that]
My problem held an opportunity!
...to learn and to grow
....
I'm not afraid anymore...."
May we all be able to find the **YO!** in the **OY!**

On this day of new beginnings,

- let us dream, hope and imagine a new year of opportunity and possibility,
- a year abundant in blessings of joy, goodness and the promise of shalom.