

I had the privilege this summer of going on safari with my family in the Okavango Delta, an inland delta of the Kalahari Desert, in the North of Botswana. There is something overwhelmingly powerful about this region and the animal life that thrives there - unaffected by human interference. On our fourth night, as the sun began to set, we watched as a pride of mother and baby lions slowly woke up for their evening hunt. The cubs woke up first, play-fighting, suckling, and trying to rouse their mothers. The mothers shrugged them off and continued to sleep, nuzzled up against one another, until eventually they too yawned, stretched their majestic 350 lb bodies and began to walk their cubs around, preparing to search for the evening's prey. As the lions disappeared into the tall grass and we drove back to our camp, silhouetted under the star-filled sky of the Okavango, I sat in the back of the jeep, losing myself in the deceptive calm of the African night.

I remember sitting there and thinking how natural it all seemed, how this routine must have gone on for so many thousands of years and would, hopefully, continue forever. How it was just right, the way things always were and always would be. It was pure existence, plain and simple - nothing ostentatious, nothing being done for show, just the majestic simplicity of God's world. And as I sat trying to let the experience sink in, I remember thinking what it would mean for us, as humans and as Jews, to live more naturally. Over the course of nine days every animal we saw lived as it always did, eat, sleep mate...defecate (probably a lifestyle many of us wouldn't complain about). Not once did we hear an animal express regret, doubt, self-consciousness, or guilt over its behaviour.

And here we sit on Rosh Hashannah asked to do just the opposite of what the rest of the universe does. The process of teshuva, in a sense, is incredibly un-natural. It mandates us to do what no other natural being does, to self-consciously and critically reflect upon our lives, breaking old habits and forging new ones. Davka on the day when we coronate God as king over all of creation, when we stand united with the entire natural world as the beneficiaries of divine blessing, on this day we focus on the self-consciousness that separates us from the natural world.

That night, as we were driving back from watching the lions, I thought about teshuva in a different way, as a return, a return to a more natural, more organic mode of Jewish life. That doesn't mean moving away from civilization into the woods, or even moving to Berkeley or Toronto Island and eating crunchy granola. It is a quest for a type of religious life, a relationship to God, to ourselves and to our tradition, that feels as natural and organic as those lions looked, waking up for their evening hunt.

What that means is a move away from a Judaism filled with tension and stress, and characterized by fear – fear of how others perceive me, fear of change and innovation, fear of intermarriage and loss of Jewish identity and all of these other concerns which serve to create a Jewish existence defined by nervousness, skittishness and negativity.

To build on this idea of teshuva as a return to a more natural way of life, I want to speak about a tension from the Rosh Hashannah Torah readings.

One would have expected, on Rosh Hashannah, to read about creation, or about teshuva. Instead, we read both days about the tension between Avraham's relationship to God and the covenant and his relationship to his children. In each stories Avraham alienates one of his sons, nearly killing him, in the name of his covenantal relationship.

This inter-generational tension is one that exists throughout, the human and animal kingdoms. In lion society, and among many other species, when a male child comes of age, the father, seeing the son as a potential threat, forces his son to leave the pride. If he refuses, the ensuing fight between father and son can lead to injury or even death.

This phenomenon is not unique to the animal kingdom. Infanticide, the murder or sacrifice of young children, was a common practice in many ancient civilizations. This practice is reflected in the founding stories of Greek mythology, which are filled with murderous battles between the Gods and their children, culminating in Zeus' devouring of his pregnant wife, in an attempt to protect his own power.

In Freudian analysis, as well as that of his successors, the tension between father and son, made famous, or infamous, by Freud's description of the Oedipus complex, is not only a personal familial tension but manifests in a broader cultural context.

As Avi Sagi explains, the tension between fathers and sons, between older and younger generations goes beyond the purely animal tension of competition for power and dominance. The tension animates the transmission of cultural identities and traditions. On

the one hand, the elders attempt to pass on their traditions, to see their identities embodied in the next generation. In doing so, they risk seeing their children as vehicles for their own wishes, living vicariously through them and denying their children's independent existences, metaphorically murdering them.

So too, the child who does not totally submit and negate himself, often ends up rebelling, denying his past and, metaphorically, murdering his parents. For Freud, this tension is never truly resolved. Instead cultural mechanisms, like laws, are put into place to inhibit the actualization of the murderous tendencies. Akeidat Yitzchak, according to Avi Sagi, offers an alternative solution.

A few minutes ago we read the story where Avraham, for the second time in his life, hears the ominous words "lech lecha." The last time he was addressed this way he lost his homeland, his parents and everything he knew. This time he is asked to give up everything he has since gained - his beloved son, the object of all of his hopes and dreams. Having lost everything that came before him, Avraham now must lose everything he dreamt would come after him. He is left utterly alone, naked and abandoned before God – estranged from his past and deprived of a future. In order to be the covenantal father, in order to pass on a tradition, Abraham must first exist himself, alone. He must forge an identity and covenantal relationship that is not dependent on anyone else.

But Abraham must also learn that Isaac too has his own dignity and value. Just as Avraham is preparing to live purely for himself, the angel grabs his arm and teaches Abraham that

his son does not exist as an object of Abraham's religious life. Infanticide, the objectification of the child as an object for the religious fulfillment of the parents, is not permitted by the God of the covenant, and will surely not enable the covenant's transmission. Only an independent Abraham and an independent Isaac can become father and son, linked in the chain of the covenant. Only with room for mutual recognition of the subjectivity, humanity and individuality of the other can the tension between the generations be eased and a true relationship and dialogue flourish, allowing the tradition to be passed on from generation to generation.

This process of alienation and separation as a necessary step for relationship permeates the Biblical texts. From the exile from the Garden of Eden, to the Jewish people's repeated exiles from the holy land - exile is the prototypical Biblical punishment. Only alienation from one's past creates the possibility to independently turn to face one's past and inherit it as a true subject of responsibility.

While our past is the spring of wisdom and of blessing, our tradition warns us against living in the past. We don't bemoan our fate as fallen from Eden, we build ourselves up towards the coming of the Messiah. While the heavens and the animal kingdom appear doomed to circularity and repetition, the circle of life, the Jewish people invented linear time - the image of history as a movement towards redemption.

So what does teshuva mean? I spoke before about living naturally, organically. I believe that to live naturally as Jews requires us to become responsible and independent inheritors

of the covenant, molding our identities in the light of our tradition, but also allowing our identities to impact our interpretation of Jewish life, creating a Judaism that is real and full of vitality.

That means teshuva requires more than just looking back at the medieval halachic codes, asking ourselves where we don't conform to the details of those codes and changing our lives to obsessively imitate each detail. The halacha and the mitzvot embodied in our tradition are not a tool for creating an obsessive and neurotic nation. The function of law is to create a culture, a way of life, a society. A society cannot exist without law - but when we become obsessed with the technicalities of the past, oblivious to law's purpose as the grounds for a flourishing future, that is a sign of a society in crisis, a society that has not learnt that like Avraham, Isaac too must be independent.

Doing teshuvah means returning, returning to God and to our people as responsible bearers of our tradition. This requires two elements. On the one hand, it requires an intimate engagement with our tradition. One cannot be an inheritor of a tradition that one does not know, whose language one does not speak (and that means more than just Hebrew) and whose ideals do not permeate his being. But being a responsible inheritor does not mean being an empty vessel that simply retains the knowledge of the tradition that came before him.

And so just as we must engage deeply with our tradition, we must do so with an embrace of the reality of our contemporary identities, with an acknowledgement of the world we live

in and the people we are. And we must be ready to understand our tradition anew in every generation, as individuals, as communities and as a people.

I want to challenge everyone in this room today. Pick a mitzvah, an element of your religious life that you identify with. Study it – learn the way that the brilliant men and women of our tradition have understood this practice in the past and what it has meant to them, legally, philosophically, spiritually, theologically, socially. But as you study, and you see the beautiful plurality of voices that our tradition contains, add your own voice – create a dialogue. Allow the beauty that you see in the practice to colour in the outlines that our tradition has provided. Inherit our tradition for yourself, and make it your natural and organic mode of life. Only that way, by truly taking possession of our tradition, can it cease to be a strange compartmentalized realm of life and instead become infused with a sense of vitality and natural harmony, a feeling that living as a Jew is as natural to us as it is for the lions to wake up for the evening hunt.

In Rav Kook's introduction to his siddur he writes about prayer as the way that we as Jews join our voices to the chorus of creation that sings out God's praises. It requires a deeply sensitive ear to hear the beauty of that song on a daily basis. Rav Kook asks us to strive for an experience of Jewish life that connects us to God and God's world in an intimate, organic and fluid manner. The deep comfort, ease and bliss with which Rav Kook describes Jewish life allowed him to be deeply accepting and sympathetic to others, to secular and religious alike. His own confidence and comfort shattered the insecurity that is so often the source of

our obsession with criticizing others and with constantly looking over our shoulders, and allowed him to create a Jewish life of true depth.

As we listen to the shofar we listen to a sound that is both full of meaning and content-less. The sound of the shofar evokes images of the ram created on the sixth day before sunset to replace Isaac on Abraham's altar. We remember the people of Israel, crowded at the foot of a lowly mountain as they await the revelation of our creator and redeemer. We picture slaves rejoicing on the yovel year as the trumpeting of the ram's horn heralds their march to freedom. And we see dreams of a messianic era where swords are beat into ploughshares and chemists manufacture cures to disease and not gasses of murder. The sound of the shofar evokes all of these images, yet it remains wordless, leaving us, the people of the covenant with the responsibility to inherit that cry and connect the dots with our own voice. In that way, we can join our voices to all of creation in a song that is as deep and natural as the roar of the lion, and the teruah of the shofar.

Shana Tova