

## Rosh Hashana 5773 (Day Two)

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Jews are constantly tempted to cross boundaries in their religious lives and more often than not, we fail to stay in the boundaries we set for ourselves. Consider the fate of Rabbi Horowitz who once a year drives far into the desert to a fancy restaurant that serves roasted pig (Joke)...

In Pirke Avot, which we have been reading this year in our adult education class, we studied the words of Rabbi Akiva:

**Rabbi Akiva once said: All is given on pledge, and a net is spread over all the living. The store is open; the storekeeper extends credit, the ledger is open and the hand writes: all who wish to borrow, may come and borrow; but the collectors make their communal rounds each day, and collect debts from a person with his consent or without his consent. They have solid ground on which to depend; the judgment is a judgment of truth; and all is prepared for the banquet.**

Rabbi Akiva teaches that our life, who we are and what we possess, is through the generosity of a compassionate God. Not only is God a compassionate God, says Rabbi Akiva, but God is a God who gives maximum credit for the things we want in this life whether it is the love of other people, a good spouse, children, good health, the security of a home, knowledge, and multiple objects good or otherwise that we gather along the way. Rabbi Akiva makes use of the imagery of Rosh Hashanah. Not only does God open his superstore 24/7, he opens a ledger and what you choose to collect in your cart --to live a moderate life or an exceedingly rich life or an expensive life that goes beyond reasonable boundaries-- it all goes in the ledger, It is all written down in the book of life. What have we chosen this past year? What will choose in the coming year?

And true to the Akiva “uncertainty principle” that “everything is hidden but freedom of choice is given,” the journey will have many detours or obstacles or ruts in the road that we cannot anticipate. What has been given us –people we care about, health, property—may be taken away with our consent or without our consent. The Lord, in Rabbi Akiva’s view, can give freely without payment, but he can also take away **with** payment. And when we are called to pay, it might seem unfair; it might be in the form of suffering or a hole in our heart but we declare “Baruch Dayan haEmet,” that God is “Righteous Judge” and “the judgment is a judgment of truth.” We don’t know the answers but we can continue to go back to the store to buy on credit what we think we need or what we desire. In the meantime, after our ledger is closed in this world, an unseen banquet awaits us in the next.

In my derasha this morning, I want to follow this image of the storekeeper with his open ledger, hand writing, extending an open line of credit as a way to concentrate our thinking about the new year ahead of us. What is on our shopping list? Who could advise us what is necessary for our shopping list? Fortunately, my adult education students know that in the same collection of mishnahs by Rabbi Akivah, there is a strategy for gaining the good and balanced life. I am not talking about how much food you eat or about watching your cholesterol or how much exercise you ought to do. Rabbi Akiva addresses the growth of our soul.

Soul growth is available to every human being, young and old. In fact, soul growth is most available to the old who have more time to reflect on life’s meaning and to occupy what used to be the busyness of life imposed on them. They are able to follow their heart and their head to choose what is most important now. Spirituality, in the rabbinic mind and especially in Rabbi Akiva’s world view, is described as defending what is valuable to us as Jews. We create boundaries in our lives to secure precious values that we discovered on the top shelves of God’s superstore. By creating the category of boundaries, we create an impenetrable space in our lives that cannot be violated. Boundaries are a rich spiritual and Jewish category.

Judaism faces a threat in a world without boundaries. I was taught in college around drinking: “the only way you can know your boundaries is to exceed them.” Las Vegas tempts us to go wild because “whatever happens here, stays here.” We rape our environment in search of new ways to power our cars and heat our homes; no land or body of water is off limits. Can we create boundaries in our personal lives? I believe we can. Today I am going to give you three boundaries from mishnah number 13 in the third chapter of Pirke Avot, all furbished by Rabbi Akiva, and ask you to choose one of them for the coming year. Boundaries, “siyagim” in Hebrew, supply the strategy, the positive energy circuits available for free at the superstore; the Core values of Torah, Wealth, and Wisdom are energized when we act to secure that these circuits are up and running. Choose one.

1. Tradition is a boundary for the life of Torah.
2. Generosity is a boundary for wealth.
3. Silence is a boundary for wisdom.

1. Tradition is a boundary for the life of Torah. What is a life of Torah? When the rabbis used the word “Torah,” they were not referring to the five books of Moses alone. In the world of Rabbi Akiva, the Temple of Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the Romans. Whole sections of the Torah referring to sacrifices and offerings could no longer be observed in a post-Temple era. There were simply no altars and no professional class of priests and no system without the Temple in place. The new leadership of rabbis sought to define the life of Torah as the secret recipe for survival, a way of thinking and living Jewish life that would save the vestiges of the old Temple practices and cultivate a way of being a Jew that was portable and personal. Rabbi Akiva says that the way we build a frame around the life of Torah by perpetuating tradition.

“Tradition!” says Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof. But not “tradition” in the sense that we blindly follow some rules that we don’t understand. Do we cover our eyes while lighting the candles or do we do a swimming motion – outward or inward? Tradition is a golden chain of communication that stretches from our ancestors to us. We receive the

communication and continue it in our own lives. Tradition is a life strategy, a circuit that creates room for living the life of a Jew. As long as we keep in check in with the “siag” of tradition –review it, study it, practice it— and keep it vibrant from one generation to the next, it will continue to provide spiritual meaning to our lives and keep our families together. Our task is to make sure that parts of the circuit have not fallen down.

There is a scene in the movie “Avalon” that shows what happens when we don’t create space for tradition in our lives. A Jewish family in Baltimore always comes together for Thanksgiving. All agree that no one is permitted to cut the turkey until everybody arrives. It doesn’t matter that you might wait an hour until the last guest enters the house. You just don’t cut the turkey until everyone is present. Uncle Gabriel is late coming to dinner after the family decides to hold its first Thanksgiving dinner out in the far away suburbs where one of the children has just purchased a home. They don’t know what has happened to him (the days before cell phones) and they cut the turkey. A half hour later, Uncle Gabriel barges in, “You cut the turkey without me?! How could you cut the turkey without me!” He barges out. From then on, the director Barry Levinson shows how the family breaks apart and stops coming together for Thanksgiving meals. One of the final scenes is a couple celebrating Thanksgiving alone, eating turkey TV dinners on folding tray tables with the television on.

Our Conservative Judaism teaches us there are fixed patterns of behavior that give integrity to the life of Torah and preserve our families. The life of Torah is preserved in a frame that is carefully managed. We are not Orthodox but we know that there are traditions worth preserving. We know by the way our ancestors lived that tradition guided whole communities for thousands of years. If we chose a tradition this year to re-learn and then repeat, what would it be? To eat a meal in a sukkah? To learn Talmud or Mishnah with the rabbi? To make sure that our children and grandchildren knew the recipes for kneidlach? To pray?

2. Generosity is a boundary for wealth. The sentence has an odd ring to it. In ancient times, it was thought that if you tithed your property, God would bless you. By giving generously, God will grow your wealth. Our children and our wealth should increase as

the sands of the sea! However, in the post-Temple world, where there the practice of tithing has fallen into disuse, why make generosity a “boundary” practice to increase your capital gains? When we set boundaries, don’t we limit the amount of our wealth? Again, we must understand the word “boundary” as “making room for” or protecting the assets you deem most valuable. And “osher,” the word for wealth, can also mean “joy.” We honor our material lives –house, hearth, land, bank account. Property provides for us and gives us joy but we are also ones who year by year are taught to be content with what we have. So by making room for generosity, by creating a boundary marker for that value, we protect the joy we already have. To put it a different way, if we give to others who are poorer than us; if we make it a habit to give to food pantries, give of our time and our money to projects that support the needy, we combine our assets with theirs and that becomes a golden truth for our lives.

Others may live selfishly but when you choose this boundary for your life, you are creating space for a different way of thinking. You see that the property you amassed in your lifetime is not created by your efforts and strength alone. “You didn’t make that.” We keep harping on that phrase in the political theater. But in one sense, God gave you the talents and the creativity to create wealth and the joy (osher) of what you have gained only has value when it is shared. The frame that we put around our wealth is inclusive of others and when we bump against it because there is only room for ourselves and our own consumption; we fail to appreciate its spiritual value.

It is interesting. In the Talmud and other rabbinic literature, we call the reporting of our charitable obligations, our tithing (or *maaser*) as a “vidui maaser,” a “confession of our giving.” The Torah instructs us to say at the beginning of the harvest:

***"I have divested my estate of sacred material, and I have also presented it to the Levi and also to the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow, totally according to Your command that You commanded me; I did not transgress any of Your commandments nor did I forget. I did not eat of it when grieving, nor did I devour it when ritually defiled, nor did I make use of it for the dead; I have heeded the voice of Hashem, my God; I have fulfilled everything that You commanded me.***

***View, from Your sacred residence, from the heavens, and bless Your people, Yisroel and the soil which You have given us, as You swore to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey."***

Why is this declaration called "a confession?" Isn't confession a word that means admission of sin? Here the person declares that he has done everything right! It is not a confession at all but rather seems almost self-congratulatory in nature. Rabbi Darrel Ginsburg quoting the Ramban says that to understand this declaration as a confession, we need to acknowledge our emotional connection to our past. If only we were to live the life of a farmer would we realize that the whole process from planting to harvest (and the steps in between) is a long and difficult one that involves stress and emotional investment. No doubt, when the produce is harvested, the completion of this long process, a person naturally reflects on this bounty being the result of **his** hard work. We are commanded to tithe to demonstrate that we acknowledge the limitations of our control over the natural world. Yet even after giving it away, there is a lingering resistance to relinquishing one's feeling of ownership, of power. The objective of the *viduy* here, in a similar vein to *teshuva*, is to help the person overcome this remaining resistance.

Vidui is a review, a verbal acknowledgment to break with the past. Similarly when one says "al chet" on Yom Kippur, it is the last step in a final process of intellectually coming to terms with putting certain sins behind us. The "al chet" is not a confessional in the true sense of saying "I sinned and now I will change." What we are really saying is "I resolved to change and this is the world that I am breaking away from." The "vidui maaser" is also a final step, a verbal acknowledgement that after a year of accumulating wealth, I have done right by God by being generous. The declaration continues that I have faith that the Lord will bless my wealth so that can continue to live in that unselfish space for the coming year.

Those who choose to create boundaries for generosity, for volunteer work, for tzedakah, for developing a capacity for caring for others will create a spiritual strategy

that will increase gratitude and joy. Whether you pay it forward or “pay back” what you’ve earned in life, these material items you purchased on credit will retain their value through your own generosity and feed not only your body but your soul as well.

3. Silence is a boundary for wisdom. This is not some new age spiritual practice brought from Zen Buddhism. This is the saying of Rabbi Akiva who lived 2000 years ago. And again I want to remind you that it is a boundary practice, silence is a fence or a circuit around wisdom. Now wisdom, like wealth, is something that is accumulated over time and grows over the aging cycle. Rabbi Akiva assumes that we already have this capacity built in. Our task is to create a boundary of silence around wisdom to preserve it from attack. In this way, we grow our souls. By being vigilant with our silence, we preserve our wisdom.

Despite the fact that we rabbis have grown a reputation for being long-winded (and by the way, I appreciate the sign someone put on the hand dryer in the bathroom, “push here for another message from the rabbi”), the ancient rabbis were known for their brevity. Getting caught up in too much idle chatter was not going to extend your wisdom. Yet I think Rabbi Akiva was saying much more than “Be quiet if you want to be wise.”

Wisdom is a power that is cultivated from within. Wisdom helps us make the right choices. Wisdom leads to appropriate action. Wisdom leads to proper speech. So, if we continue with the idea of boundaries in the way that I am suggesting, then creating a space for silence is a buffer to the wisdom you contain.

Let’s be plain. We are tempted daily by threats to who we are. When someone crosses us, we experience the encounter as a “put down” and the impulse is say whatever is in our head. The words we choose can come out angry. The words we choose can come out as defensive. But before we give into the impulse to react, we must draw on our capacity for wisdom. Because two forces are at work: one is the way of the flesh, “when I am injured, I want to fight back;” one is the way of the spirit, to hold back, to know that the pain of the temptation for anger is only temporary and to say to oneself, “I

prefer silence.” Silence does not mean you turn the other cheek. Silence means that you sleep on it. Silence means you take a walk around the lake. Silence means that you wait a week before an emotionally charged email calls for your immediate attention. Part of putting out fires is going back to your wisdom bank and using the space in between to dwell in silence. You put a frame around your wisest self. Persons who adopt the boundary of silence will learn to stop angry words, to bite their tongue. For as much as it hurts, we who use silence learn that the pain of personal attack is temporary; the power of a well thought out solution is permanent.

Rabbi Akiva certainly knew in his day the practice of *hitbodidut* which is described elsewhere in the mishnah: “Hasidim Rishonim shoim sha’ah echat lifnai tefillah,” the “first pious ones would wait an hour before saying their prayers.” To be alone in silence, to rise to challenge of speaking to God, to know one’s thoughts before one speaks, to know that language is potentially healing or destructive, goes into the process of defending our innate wisdom. We acknowledge that we don’t have all the answers and we cannot arrive at every solution using our own wisdom. We say the “power of life and death is in the tongue.” Better to observe silence as a boundary measure lest our anger or ego burst the bonds of relationships or civility.

God knows that we need people who choose more silence in their lives this year. After a political season fraught with off the cuff remarks and stupidity, we need people who can build a fortress of silence around the soul so that the wisdom they contribute to the world is genuine, gentle, not hurtful, and peaceful.

The Ten Days of Repentance can be likened to a shopping period. We know where we came from this past and we know we can do better. Rabbi Akiva writes that the shopkeeper is busy extending credit to us; the ledger is open and the hand writes everything down. Another page is turned in the ledger and at the top of the page is the date, the Second of Tishrei 5773. You go down the aisles and ask the salesman for the boundary package that will serve your spiritual growth for the coming year. Will you set up personal boundaries for meaningful Jewish traditions, new and old? Will you allow generosity to enter into your life and give room for sharing of your wealth and

time? Or will you draw a boundary of silence around your words and behaviors so that the knee jerk reaction of angry words or careless talk gets slapped so that your innate wisdom comes shining through?

I am asking each one of you to choose one. It is a test of multiple choices not one answer is better than another. But one is right for your soul this year. What will it be? The ledger is open.