

Sometimes I wax pretty philosophical; I will admit, sometimes too much so. Alas, this is a product of my original educational experience and first love. But other times I can be more pragmatic; after all I am a pulpit rabbi with real folks from an enormous diversity of backgrounds and orientations. Tonight, I wish to be very pragmatic indeed. I wish to get behind all the talk of turning, repentance, and forgiveness... back, back to the deep core of what Yom Kippur is all about. And that, I believe, is mending fences.

Despite our best intentions, over the years, we fossilize. Sometimes a little, sometimes quite a lot. We become crusty and less likely to welcome any real change in our souls. And even more significantly, increasingly unable to change even if we wish to. Indeed, one prayer in the Mahzor Wings of Awe states (one I hope to leave out of our hopefully new Mahzor that the Ritual Committee is planning for next year) that despite all of our intentions and fanfare, we have not changed since last year.

That sentiment is entirely too pessimistic for me, and frankly, for Judaism's key mission: to enable persons to become the best versions of themselves; to never give up hope that this is possible.

One need not be a part of the penal system to know that recidivism is very high. And I am not speaking mainly of ex-cons, I am speaking of us. Many times we fully intend to turn toward a greater righteousness, and we actually do turn, but then, somewhere along the long and difficult way, we fall back. Rabbi Levy can be forgiven for having composed that pessimistic sentence, for it certainly seems to hold true all too often. But it does not always hold true. The very observance of Yom Kippur itself would have vanished from Jewish life long ago if it never worked to produce a changed, more whole and more holy person some of the time.

I am speaking to you not *ex cathedra*, as it were, but more like the Reverend Arthur Dimsdale.

The first person I look to in order to see the struggle to become holier, and failing more often than not, is myself. But I have succeeded on occasion; more, I have seen many persons succeed over the years, and so I hold a provisionally optimistic perspective in this regard. One of my inspirations here, I think my most important inspiration, is my wife Diane. I would like to quote something she wrote a month or so ago:

*At different stages in my life, I took mental notes as to when I felt the tide of change taking place. At this juncture in time, I have become resigned that many changes are irrevocable and sometimes dark with a finite future, filled with unresolved hopes and dreams that will probably never come to fruition.*

*Much of my life has been the toss of a coin, but not without blessings. I'm thankful for Bill who is a gentle soul and helps me sort out many emotional issues. I am blessed to*

*have two adult sons who are challenging personalities, but nonetheless my precious gifts. A brother who has been at my side all my life.*

*Mending fences with those you care about is being able to see things through their eyes and coming to terms with their point of view.*

*I love the expression “Baby Boomers” as it carries a youthful feel. An oxymoron to be sure.*

*Many family members have gone the way of the roses, blooming above their graves as will be my generation’s fate not terribly far into the future. I apologize for sounding so terribly downtrodden. I’m sure there will be days ahead filled wonderful memories but not now. Consider this my dirge.*

But I do not consider this Diane’s dirge. I consider it a holy prayer. And I also find the term Baby Boomers to be a wonderful term. It may have been coined when our generation was indeed made up of babies, but now that the youngest of the boomers are in their sixties and the oldest are in their seventies, those of us still living, anyway, the term is even more appropriate. Because (and this is Yom Kippur’s greatest message) *it is never too late.*

Let me repeat one of the lines from Diane’s dirge/prayer: “Mending fences with those you care about is being able to see things through their eyes and coming to terms with their point of view.”

It sounds so simple, and in truth is so hard. Because this is the respect in which we fossilize: our points of view. In the worst case scenario, we become so utterly convinced that our point of view is the only possible legitimate point of view that we are truly like a fossil. The 4 million year old thigh bone of an Australopithecus, laying in the hardened substratum for ever, once living tissue changed to stone, unchanging. We believe our opinion to be sacred, canonized, as perfect as human opinion can be, and so cannot fathom why we should budge from it.

We have even done away with the very verb “opine” itself, leaving only the derivative noun “opinion.” To opine means to come to a tentative conclusion, stronger than a belief without evidence, but not so strong as knowledge, with its much greater amount of evidence. To opine is to reach a provisional hypothesis.

An opinion is meant to be subjected to test evidence and, if and when found to be insufficient to account for that evidence, as is almost always the case, to change. OMG, to change an opinion!

And this is not waffling, it is not betraying a tenant, it is using the very good minds that we have been gifted with, albeit, and I say this sadly, minds we use all too seldomly.

And I am even sadder to say that moving these persons into a truer and holier pathway is close to, although not utterly, impossible.

Then there are those whose points of view are not quite so fossilized. Persons who understand that their opinions are not facts of knowledge, but see no way to change. These folks at least have a better chance. The right teaching my help. A powerful event of just the right sort may help. The point of view is ossifying, but not yet turned to stone. One good earthquake may pop it back out of the substratum and let it breath again.

And then there are those with such low self esteem that they cannot believe they are even allowed a point of view. These are very dangerous people. As Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote: those without sufficient will attach themselves to others who they perceive have a strong will. But the will they attach themselves to may well be, and usually is, a will of selfish greed and megalomania. Alas, this has occurred all-too-often in history, and it is happening right now.

The wicked child must be slapped down, but the simple child must be opened up. For those who find it difficult to believe that they have a right to a point of view, we must not steer them toward another with a strong will, but to one who can teach them how to wonder, how to ponder, how to embrace another without falling into their will. How to reach out and learn to see things from their point of view without, on the one hand, automatically making it their own, but on the other hand, realizing that it is as legitimate a point of view as any they could come up with.

And maybe these points of view can complement one another, harmonize, be woven into a rope far stronger than either strand alone.

And strangely enough, this technique applies to those of ossified and fossilized opinions as well. Those with stronger self esteem, even those with overly inflated self esteem. A self is only so large, only so strong. Not one can stand in this world alone. Maybe every pusillanimous creature upon the earth has a brain, but it is the family, the circle of friends, the community that turns mere thought into truth, into holiness, into righteousness.

When we have managed to alienate our family, our friends, our community, we have dug our own grave. Might as well lie down in it and finish the process of becoming a fossilized relic. Or... another alternative. Mend the fence.

Mending fences is a good metaphor. A fence divides one from another, but in doing so, also unites them into a single region, and thus a single purpose.

A fence that demarcates, but has gates, that allows access. Not an electrified wall with flesh piercing spikes and an alligator filled moat. That is the grave again. There is no

cross contact there, no embracing, no mutual aid, no cross-fertilization of ideas. Just stasis: stony, buried death.

Reach out to your family, to your friends, to your community. Put the blood back into your aging bones. Boom with life like a baby. Come home, drop the tension that poisons your bones and muscles, dims your eyes, shuts your heart. Reach out and mend the fences.