

A few weeks ago, I watched on Facebook Live as a beautiful old wooden building was torn apart, piece by piece, and reduced to an enormous pile of rubble. The building was the *Mercaz*, the Hebrew word for “center,” and it sat at the center of my summer camp for the last 99 years. That’s right: when the Mercaz was built, the United States had just fought in the First World War and Calvin Coolidge was president. Over the years, the Mercaz served as the dining hall, canteen, requisition room, staff lounge, dance studio, nature room, radio broadcast center, prayer space, and recycling storage area – not to mention a place where visiting campers set up their sleeping bags and camped out on the floor. My earliest memories of the building include wandering through the dusty wooden hallways, wondering what lay behind each mysterious door, and thinking that there was some great secret at the root of this big old structure.

And so I was pretty bummed to watch the Mercaz bulldozed into scrap. But after 99 years, it was finally time to say goodbye to this nearly-condemned building, which no longer served all of the functions that it needed to serve. The dust had started to bother campers’ allergies. The floorboards were weak and in danger of collapsing under the weight of enthusiastic ruach-filled dancing. And new technology has led to possibilities for innovative ways of engaging campers. A new space needed to be built, and in order to do that, something old had to be destroyed.

Even knowing how much benefit can come from the new building, which looks beautiful in the design scheme, I was still distraught to watch the Mercaz bulldozed. Had it been up to me, I would likely have never torn down my beloved building, even once campers punched holes in the floor – even once the floorboards began to rot. Intellectually, I understand the need for change – and yet tearing down that first beam would have felt nearly impossible for me.

Because here's the thing about change: it's not easy. It usually involves destroying something. And we, all of us who need it the most, are usually the least willing to see it.

I have recently been binge-watching the TV show *Couples Therapy* on Showtime. In this brilliant documentary series, psychologist Orna Guralnik counsels couples who are looking to deepen or salvage their relationships. Early on, Orna notes to her clinical supervisor that nearly everyone who comes to couples' therapy is trying to fix their spouse. What they don't realize is that the person they need to fix is *themselves*.

Something in *us* has to change in order for our lives to grow. The problem isn't out there. *It's in here.*

Most of us are completely unaware of the floorboards within ourselves that are rotting. The dust building up in our corners. The cobwebs growing in our rafters. Rosh Hashanah says to us: pay attention. Do an inventory. Look at the pieces within ourselves that need repair, and get to work. This is *teshuva*.

One of my favorite moments in Tanakh involves Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. In this somewhat disturbing story, Judah is journeying through the land when he comes upon a prostitute. He sleeps with her without a second thought. Later, when his daughter-in-law – the wife of his deceased son – is revealed to be pregnant, Judah is furious: according to Jewish law, she was supposed to be betrothed to Judah’s youngest son. How could she have been so irresponsible as to lay with another man? In a dramatic twist, Tamar reveals that Judah is, in fact, the one who impregnated her; *she* was the supposed prostitute by the side of the road. Judah’s transformation is sudden: upon realizing his mistake, he says, “She is more righteous than I.” He realizes that he has neglected his duty to care for Tamar, and he radically alters his approach to her. Judah transforms his anger into repentance. He changes his life, and Tamar’s life as well. He does *teshuva*.

Recently, I was in a situation where I felt a lot of anger at a close friend. I had been deeply hurt by the other person’s actions, and I kept waiting for an apology. I knew that *I* had done nothing wrong – I knew this as deeply as the other person knew that *they* had done nothing wrong. It was much easier for me to rage at them for their unwillingness to admit fault than it would have been for me to admit my own culpability. Here is the thing, though: I couldn’t make them change. I could only change myself. We were at an impasse. I had to decide: would I live with this festering

anger, this rot and decay in my floorboards, or would I tear it down and rebuild something in its place? What would Dr. Orna say?

I can't pretend that I have fully dismantled my anger. In fact, I'm not sure that this is possible. But I do know that when I took responsibility for the piece of the situation that was my fault, it gave me a sense of control. Suddenly, I had a path forward. With that sense of control came an easing in my anger. The conflict wasn't suddenly over, and I certainly don't feel a sense of closure. But taking responsibility gave me a way through the anger, and on the other side of anger sits possibility and openness.

Now let me be clear. For those who have suffered trauma and abuse, this call to dismantle anger rings hollow. I am not asking anyone to forgive their abusers. I want to say this as clearly as possible: Your trauma is not your fault. You did nothing wrong. Your trauma is not your fault. You did nothing wrong. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes, "forced forgiveness without asking anything of the perpetrator is a way to reinforce the existing status quo and structures of power."¹ Moving through trauma can be a long and arduous process, and, as I discussed in this room last year, there *is* a place for anger – and *sustained anger* – in overcoming the world's injustices.

But within most of our relationships, there is space for us to do the work. Us – all of us. For some, we recognize a need to change our lives, but the external factors feel too fixed to do anything: *If I had the right job, I*

¹ <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2023/02/01/evanston-books-rabbi-danya-ruttenberg-qa/>

would have enough money to be happy. If I had better housing, I would feel more at home. If my spouse weren't so difficult, I wouldn't be so angry. If my children didn't have so many tantrums, I wouldn't be so tired. If I had better friends, I wouldn't be so lonely.

That all may be true. And there are things you can do about SOME of those external factors. But sometimes, the external factors are just an excuse for what's going on inside.

One of my favorite scenes from the book *Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss involves the main character playing the lute in front of an audience. An angry audience member, who happens to be skilled at magic, causes one of the lute's strings to break. The character realizes what's going on but manages to recalibrate his chords and play on fewer strings. What happens when the audience member breaks another string, then another, until all that is left is one thin wire? What should this musician do?

Play.

When we only have one string left, we have infinitely more strings than zero. We don't walk off the stage, shout angrily at the audience, and give up. We learn to play the music on the one string that we've got.

If all the externals — job, housing, family, friends — are stuck the way they are, then guess what's left?

It's us. We are what is left.

Or as Rav Taylor Swift teaches: It's me, hi. I'm the problem, it's me.

Sometimes our floorboards are too old and weak; our arguments too tired and flat. Sometimes we have to play the one string we have left, which is ourselves.

And so, if you sat in Orna's office for a few sessions, what would she say about you to her supervisor? How would she characterize the way that you speak to others? What would she gently, lovingly, ask you to demolish about yourself in order to rebuild?

The Ashamnu prayer, which we recited last Saturday night as part of the Selichot service, and which we will repeat next week on Yom Kippur, is almost comical in its hyperbole. "Oy," we say, "We have trespassed, we have lied, we have robbed, we've provoked, we've gone astray, we've led others astray." We bang our chests in a show of mock culpability. No one has really done all of those things. How can we be expected to take on the burden of all that guilt?

But the hope, I think, is that in listing all of these possible mistakes, some idea of the need for change breaks through. We bang our chests, hoping to crack open that first floorboard. To cut through the rot. To break through the rafters. *To see that it's me, hi. I'm the problem, it's me.*

In tractate Rosh Hashanah, the Talmud tells us that three books are opened on this holiday: the fully righteous are inscribed immediately in the Book of Life, while the truly wicked are inscribed in the Book of Death – a complicated theological claim, of course, but stay with me a moment. Everyone in the middle – not quite one way or the other – is put in the

middle book, the list of people for whom the verdict is temporarily suspended. Our actions between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur decide where our names will be sealed. Rabbi Jan Uhrbach of JTS reads this well-known midrash and brings in the commentary of the Baal Shem Tov, as quoted in *Netivot Shalom*: “This means that they open three new books, in which each person must inscribe *themselves* for the coming year.”²

Themselves.

The Baal Shem Tov hints at a radical thought here: perhaps the first two books are full of empty white pages. Perhaps *no one* is written in the book of the fully good or the fully evil. Perhaps we are all somewhere in the middle. We are all in need of change. And we all have the power to inscribe *ourselves* in the Book of Life.

My prayer for all of us is that, as we engage in this really hard, painful process of dismantling, we remember that at the core of each of us is a strong foundation, a “me” that is not a problem at all. As sad as it is to tear down a building, it’s still camp. It’s still the same place – but better. Change isn’t easy, and it always involves loss, and it is always necessary. Let’s get to work. Shanah tovah.

² Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, “Choosing to Choose,” in *Choice and Change: Reflections on the High Holidays from JTS 2023/5784*.