

Teshuvah Gemurah:
You can change & start by changing your attitude
by Rabbi Lisa Malik
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(Throw/show GLEE T-shirt: "I'm With Stoopid")

This T-shirt was thrown out to the audience at the GLEE concert that took place at the Izod Center in East Rutherford, NJ this past June. Actually, it wasn't thrown; it was projected out from an air-gun that shot it all the way to the back rows.. where my daughter, Eva, caught it. She and her 5 friends and Rivkah giggled GLEEfully as the shirt came flying in the air towards them. The shirt reads, "I'm with Stoopid" & it was worn by the character Brittany on one of the GLEE episodes featuring Lady Gaga's hit song, "**Born This Way.**" In the first part of the episode, the character Rachel gets injured during a rehearsal and breaks her nose. When she goes to the doctor, he suggests that she take advantage of this opportunity to improve the shape and size of her nose; he recommends rhinoplasty. As Rachel perseverates as to whether or not she should keep her nose the way it is, some of the show's other characters try to come to terms with their own physical imperfections and other traits. Ultimately, Rachel decides to keep her long nose and each of the other cast members decides to embrace his/her idiosyncrasies as well. In the big musical number that gives voice (literally) to the moral of the show, each character appears on the stage wearing a white T-shirt with black letters, boldly emblazoned across the front, proudly proclaiming his/her unique attribute that makes him/her different than others. Rachel wears a shirt that says, "Nose." Finn wears one that says, "Can't dance." Emma's shirts read, "OCD" & "Ginger." And Brittany, the 'dumb blonde' on the show, wears a shirt that reads, "I'm With Stoopid" with an arrow pointing to herself, and with the word, "Stoopid" spelled incorrectly, of course.

In general, I am in favor of this show's message--- especially for our children, who so want to fit in and be like everyone else. In a society that values perfect bodies, perfect faces, and homogeneity, it's difficult to be the one who stands out. So, I am delighted when a popular TV show conveys to our teens that it's OK to be different, that it's OK to be "born this way"--- with a big nose or a cleft chin or a tendency towards plumpness. This is a great message for our children to hear, one that is aimed towards fostering self-acceptance and squelching the instinct to diet excessively or to have plastic surgery... in an effort to look like or be like somebody else.

However, at another level, I have a problem with the message of this GLEE episode and of Lady Gaga's song, "Born This Way." While I approve of the statement, "I was born this way" when it comes to physical characteristics and other attributes that are out of your control that make you who you are.. in a good, or at least, neutral way, this statement can serve as an excuse or cop-out in other contexts. If you are an angry person who carries a grudge and refuses to forgive others' mistakes, should you also be encouraged to say, "I was born this way" ? If your son gets bad grades because he has learning disabilities that make it impossible for him to comprehend certain concepts in a traditional school environment, that's understandable... and we want others to accept him as he is. However, if your son gets bad grades because he is lazy or because he would rather spend his time playing with his X-box or texting his friends incessantly rather than studying, then should he also be encouraged to proclaim, "I was born this way"?! I think not.

On the GLEE episode, most of the shirts highlighted characteristics that were out of the characters' control. Someone who was born with poor eyesight should not be ashamed of his need to wear glasses; so, we applaud Artie's "Four Eyes" shirt. But someone who is mean to others and wears a shirt with the words "**Bad Attitude**" emblazoned across the front? Should the GLEE character, Lauren, have been encouraged to proclaim, "I was born this way?"

Many people, not only teenagers, use phrases like, "I was born this way," as an **excuse not to change**. But, while it may be impossible to change one's eyesight or the size of one's nose (without surgery, that is), it is possible to change one's attitude.

(PAUSE)

It is oh so easy to **adopt defeatist attitudes** that **prevent us from changing bad attitudes such as:**

●**"This is how I am. Oh well. I can't do anything about it."**

"I've always been an impatient person. I just can't help it when I blow up at my kids."

"I've always been overweight and I've always had bad eating habits, so there's no way I'm ever going to be able to change."

OR

●**"Everybody knows that I'm spiteful and self-centered."**

"Since everyone already perceives me in a certain way.. there's no way that I can change. And even if I do change, people will still think of me in the same way."

It is oh so easy to **adopt these defeatist attitudes** and to **succumb to the belief** that we **cannot change, that we are victims of our past.** (PAUSE)

There are apparently many baseball fans in this congregation; some of you even share my husband's passion for the Yankees. I would guess that, even those of you who are Mets fans, will be able to envision and relate to the scene from a Yankee game that I am about to describe. Imagine a big screen at the stadium... a huge screen that is visible to each and every spectator. At any given moment, everyone in the stadium has the choice of looking at the players themselves while they are on the field... OR at this screen. While players are at-bat and the game is actually being played, the screen merely projects a larger, close-up image of what was happening on the field. But, at other times, the screen provides additional information or commentary.

One recurrent feature that appears on the screen is the projection of a close-up photo of each baseball player, along with his stats. As each player goes up to bat, he and the spectators are confronted with a chart of numbers, including batting average, # of home runs, # of RBIs, # of runs, and # of hits. Following the stats for the season, there are the player's stats for the current game, including **# of errors** & **# of strikeouts**. So, during one game, when Derek Jeter got up to bat in the 8th inning, we (and he) were reminded that he had struck out in the 3rd inning.

This video projection display serves as a **concrete, visible reminder of each player's past performance**... a reminder for the player, as well as for the spectators. Every time the stats of a player who had performed poorly in a particular game are projected, the people in the stands are encouraged to wonder, "Will he mess up again?" And, if the batter happens to glance up at the screen before taking a swing at the oncoming ball, he is also left to ponder a similar question, "Am I going to continue to play badly this game?" I could just imagine a player feeling discouraged and demoralized by those giant numbers on the screen... feeling that he is a **victim of his past mistakes**. I could imagine that the batter's perception of himself as a 'bad player,' could turn into what psychologists call a "**self-fulfilling prophecy**" or a condition of "**learned helplessness**."

According to **Dr. Martin Seligman**, a Psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, **learned helplessness** is the condition of a human being or an animal in which it has learned to behave helplessly, even when the opportunity is restored for it to help itself by avoiding an unpleasant or harmful circumstance to which it has been subjected. **Learned helplessness theory** is the view that clinical depression and related mental illnesses result from a **perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation.**

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It is oh so easy to **succumb to the belief** that **that we have no control over the outcomes of the situations we face**, that we are **victims of our past**, that we **are incapable of change.** (BIG PAUSE)

But, **WAIT**, our **Jewish tradition tells us otherwise!!!!**

We do not need to be imprisoned by our past. We do not have to be stuck in a rut because of others' past perceptions of us or because of our own past self-perceptions.

That is what ***teshuvah*** is all about. And 'tis the season of *teshuvah*. The 10 days between Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur are known as "*Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah*," "The 10 Days of Repentance." During these 10 days, and throughout the year, we are **encouraged to change our ways.** And if we do *teshuvah*, **no transgression has to be a permanent mark on our record.** We are all capable of transformation, with the key to behavior change being **attitude change.** (PAUSE)

Consider two people in two separate cars sitting in a **traffic jam.** You might have seen this before: One person is clutching the steering wheel in a death grip, scowling, yelling at the other cars, and probably cursing. The other person, in a car right alongside the first car, is listening to the radio, singing at the top of her lungs, and having a grand ol' time.

**Same event. Different attitude. Different response.**

**Jack Canfield**, one of the authors of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, depicted this concept in semi-mathematical terms, in the equation:

$$\mathbf{O=E+R} \qquad \mathbf{Outcome=Events + Response.}$$

This equation is the antidote to the condition of “learned helplessness.” What it posits is that the way we **RESPOND** to an **EVENT** with our **attitude** can affect the **behavioral OUTCOME** of that **EVENT**.

Reflecting the same sentiment, I recently came across the following saying inscribed on a plaque, “**A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather, a person with a certain set of attitudes.**”

Each and every one of us has the capacity to choose how we **respond** to the **events** in our lives. We can respond to negative **circumstances** with a negative attitude, or we can respond to negative situations with a positive attitude. (PAUSE)

Last summer, I was faced with a mildly negative **situation** & I responded....badly, to say the least....with a negative **attitude**. My bad **reaction** to a relatively benign set of negative **circumstances** ultimately led me to consider an **attitude adjustment**... an adjustment that proved to be invaluable when **Ariel was hospitalized at CHOP** with meningitis last fall, just 2 days after Rosh HaShanah 5771. Reflecting on my own attitude and my chosen responses to negative circumstances is what led me to write this sermon.

So what happened last summer? My children & I were blessed to be able to travel to **Aruba** on an all-expense paid vacation with my mother. But, for the first day or so of this trip, I certainly didn't feel or act very appreciative of this incredible gift. On the contrary, I let some traveling-related setbacks get to me, resulting in an extremely **negative reaction**.

The travel frustrations began with my getting lost on the way to the airport and continued with my parking in the wrong terminal, and then having to shlep to the correct terminal with my kids and our luggage at 6 o'clock in the morning. When we finally arrived at the check-in counter, it turned out that one of our bags was too heavy and I had to redistribute items from one suitcase to the next. Unfortunately, the bag that was empty enough to accommodate more 'stuff' had already been placed on the conveyor belt. Things went from bad to worse once we arrived in Aruba. As we waited and waited and waited for our bags to arrive at the baggage claim carousel, we soon realized that one of our three bags was missing. After we finally located the one US Airways baggage claim clerk in the terminal, which took nearly 20 minutes, he couldn't locate our lost suitcase in the computer system; it had, apparently, never even been scanned into the system in Philadelphia. Lovely. At that point, I lost it.. i.e. I lost my cool, as well as my luggage. Not a proud maternal moment. But it didn't end there. I remained in a negative, moody state for the next 8 hours or so. Despite the gorgeous weather and room with a view, my response to the situation was shameful. Neither my kids nor my mother could stand to be around me. Honestly, I couldn't even stand to be around myself.

Something happened in Aruba that **finally got me to shift gears and to, at least, try to change my attitude**. It was an encounter in the elevator with a member of the hotel staff named, **Myrza**. While I scowled and stewed about my misfortune, Myrza smiled at me and asked me how my vacation was going. I said, "Not so well. One of our bags was lost in transit." Myrza responded by saying, "**I'm so sorry for your loss.**" (PAUSE) Wow. These are words that you say to people who have, God forbid, experienced the death of a family member or friend. And, yet, here I was, on the receiving end of these words in such a trivial circumstance. (PAUSE) Hearing those words in the elevator that day really helped me to put things into perspective. Here I was, on a beautiful Caribbean island with my family... all of us, thank God, were and are healthy... and I was brooding over lost luggage! It was clear to me at that moment that **I had to do something about my negative attitude**.

And I did.. **last November**, when **I found myself in the midst of another challenging travel scenario**, one that was **filled with many more setbacks than just one *fahkahkta* piece of lost luggage**.

Adi & I went to a wedding in **Israel** over Thanksgiving weekend. My flight back to the States was on Sunday, a few days before Adi's, because I had a teaching commitment & I had to get back to my kids. I was actually on for carpool on Monday morning.

Well, the craziest thing happened on board; it was tragic, actually. Believe it or not, someone had a heart attack on the plane and so the pilot decided to make an emergency landing in Frankfurt to take this man to the hospital. Unfortunately, the man died before we arrived at our destination. It must have been horrible for his wife. Could you imagine? As for the rest of us onboard that flight, we had to deplane, get our bags, go through customs & passport control....wait on line to book another flight, check our bags (again), go through security (again), & board a new plane.

Hours later, I found myself on plane #2: en route from Frankfurt to Philadelphia. We spent 5 hours on the runway, waiting for de-icing machine, which was not forthcoming... ended up having to deplane AGAIN, get our bags AGAIN, go through customs & passport control AGAIN... and book ourselves another flight.

Unfortunately, because of snowy & icy weather conditions, many planes from Frankfurt were canceled, so there were hundreds of people grounded overnight. And, to make matters worse, there weren't any hotels room left in Frankfurt by the time I and the other passengers on my flight deplaned, so many of us ended up in Heidelberg, which was over an hour away from the airport. The shuttle bus didn't arrive at the hotel until after 11 PM. Then, we had to be up bright and early at 7 AM the next morning to return to Frankfurt.

I finally arrived home on Tuesday evening, 36 hours later than my initial estimated time of arrival.

**Same event. Same person. Different attitude. Different response.**

Actually, the second airport situation was objectively much worse than the first one. But, even though I faced travel-related setbacks in Germany that were even more trying than the travel-related setbacks in Aruba, I was determined not to let them get to me this time. I was determined to react differently the second time around. I consciously tried not to complain, not to get agitated, and to view this situation as an opportunity to meet new people and to seek out ways to be of help to others.

One could view my conscious attempts at attitudinal and behavior change as a form of ***teshuvah...*** While I can't say that it was actually an "*averah*," a "sin," to overreact to lost luggage, I was ashamed of myself and the way I acted in Aruba. Perhaps I wasn't committing a transgression with my bad attitude, but, the first time around, I certainly wasn't embodying the Jewish value of "***erech apayim***," being slow to anger, you know one of the attributes of God that we try to emulate, one of the 13 divine attributes that we mention over and over again during the High Holydays. I am proud to say that I was much better at exercising this Jewish value the second time around, when I was confronted with travel frustrations again. My attitudes and behaviors in Germany were a vast improvement over those that I displayed in Aruba. So, in a sense, it was a type of *teshuvah*.. the kind of *teshuvah* that is consistent with **Maimonides'** definition of "**complete repentance**," "***teshuvah g'murah***."

In the words of the Rambam, ***Eyzo hi teshuvah g'murah?***

### **What constitutes complete repentance?**

***Zeh she-bah l'yado davar she-avar bo v'efshar v'yado la-asoto, u-farah v'lo asah, mipnei ha-teshuvah (lo mi-yirah v'lo me-kishalon koach)***

**“He who was confronted by the identical situation in which he transgressed (last time), and it lies within his power to commit the transgression but he nevertheless abstained, and did not succumb- out of sincere repentance, and not out of fear or weakness. If he abstained and did not sin, this is a true penitent.”**

In the biblical sage of Yosef and his 11 brothers, **Yehudah** provides a great case study of this type of *teshuvah*.

As you may recall, Yosef's brothers, including Yehudah, were very jealous of him. They were envious of the favoritism that their father, Yaakov, showed towards Yosef, which he expressed in quite visible ways, such as by giving him a special ornamented coat... you know, the “amazing Technicolor dreamcoat” of Broadway fame. The brothers were also less that thrilled about Yosef's dreams of grandeur and of the way Yosef used to brag. But, whether or not you want to claim that Yosef deserved to be mistreated by his siblings, you'd have to agreed that the brothers went overboard when they threw him into the pit. They had a chance to relent and to take him out of the pit, which is something that the eldest brother Reuven contemplated, but, instead, they decided to sell him as a slave to some traders who were on their way to Egypt. And it was Yehudah, the 4<sup>th</sup> oldest son of Yaakov, the one who seemed to be the ringleader of the brothers, who made this decision to literally 'sell out' his baby brother, Yosef.

Yehudah missed the opportunity to do the right thing. Given his leadership position within the family, the other brothers would have probably listened had Yehudah suggested lifting Yosef out of the pit and bringing him home to dear ol' Dad. Instead, he sold Yosef for 40 pieces of silver, causing unnecessary anguish both to his brother and to their father, Yaakov.

Yet, ultimately, many years later, Yehudah is faced with a similar situation and this time, he rises to the occasion. The second time around, Yehudah is faced with a terrible dilemma. The man who was second-in-command to Pharaoh in Egypt, a man who was actually Yosef in disguise, demanded that Binyamin be left as a prisoner in Egypt.. as a punishment for having stolen the goblet. This time, Yehudah actually had a valid excuse for leaving his youngest brother to his fate. Standing up against the Egyptian government could have endangered his life. Yet, in spite of the potential danger to himself, Yehudah refused to return to his father in the the Land of Canaan without Binyamin. Yehudah was literally willing to sacrifice his life for his younger brother.

Yehudah had an opportunity to act differently the second time around.. and he seized this opportunity. He decided to **treat Binyanim differently than he had treated Yosef** years ago. By making this decision, Yehudah did the kind of ideal *teshuvah* that Maimonides refers to as "complete repentance."

**Yehudah did *teshuvah*** and **Yosef forgave him**, as well as the rest of his siblings. Yet, the older brothers still felt the need to lie to Yosef because, deep inside, they didn't believe that Yosef had really forgiven them. After Yaakov died, the brothers said to Yosef, "***Avicha tzivah lifney moto lemor***" "**Before his death, your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Yosef, "Forgive, I urge you, the offense of the servant of the God of your father."** (Genesis 50:17). Even though Yaakov didn't really issue this command to Yosef, the brothers felt the need to tell this white lie to protect themselves from the possible consequences of what they had done. And, as it turned out, **Yosef did forgive them.**

In this sense, **Yosef did *teshuvah* as well.** At some point or other during his time in Egypt, either when he was first sold as a slave or when he was thrown into prison after being falsely accused of raping Potifar's wife, at some point he must have been angry at his brothers for what they did to him. Perhaps he was even consumed with anger, or even hatred, towards his brothers for **betraying him.** But, at some later point, he **let go of that anger...** and he **learned to forgive...** Maybe he didn't forget what they did, but he did **forgive.** Any of you who have been betrayed by family members, friends, or colleagues, may be able to relate to what I am describing.

If you have ever had trouble forgiving someone who caused you pain, you know how difficult it can be to forgive. So, we have to give credit to Yosef, as well as to Yehudah, for doing *teshuvah*.

As we contemplate the type of *teshuvah* that each of us is going to do this year and as we consider the extent to which we are capable of change, we can look towards the exemplary attitudes and behaviors of our biblical ancestors, Yosef and Yehudah. The stories of Yehudah & Yosef in the Torah teach us that it is possible to effect changes in our lives, that it is possible to do *teshuvah*.

**(SHOW ADI'S T-SHIRT):**

This is the T-Shirt that my husband, Adi, was wearing when I first met him at Stanford University back in 1992: **"You can not escape from yourself."**

While it may be true that we were each born with certain characteristics that we cannot or should not change, we should not rely on this T-shirt's words or on the words of Lady Gaga's song, **"I Was Born This Way,"** as **excuses for bad behavior** or **bad attitudes**. It is possible to **escape from yourself** and to **overcome certain shortcomings**, but only if you are **open to the possibility of change** & are **prepared to do *teshuvah***.

If you are willing to change, if you truly strive to reach your highest potential, there is always the possibility of self-improvement and transformation.

***L'Shanah Tovah U-Metukah.***

**May you all have a good & sweet New Year.**