

Rosh haShana 5779: On Clenched Fists and Open Hands

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Every December, my dad visited my elementary school class to light Chanukah candles and teach everyone how to spin the dreidel. And every single year, he read us “Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins.”

The book follows Jewish trickster Hershel of Ostropol, who visits a town that has been terrorized for years by a nasty band of goblins. These goblins make life miserable for the townspeople all year, but it’s always the worst at Hanukkah. The only way to get rid of the goblins is to manage to light the Hanukkah candles each night, for all eight nights of Hanukkah.

On the second night, Herschel is interrupted by a big greedy green fellow. Hershel looks up as he barges into the room and nonchalantly offers him a pickle.

“I have plenty,” he says. “Take all you want.”

The goblin sticks his hand into the jar and grabs as many pickles as he can hold. There’s just one problem – try as he might, he cannot get his hand out of the jar.

“I’m stuck!” The goblin yells. “You put a spell on this jar!”

Hershel agrees - it is a mighty spell indeed. And then he lights the Hanukkah candles as the goblin watches, immobile, his fist stuck in a pickle jar.

Of course the goblin's hand is not really stuck. And after Hershel lights the Hanukkah candles, he tells the goblin just that, revealing the secret to the "spell" - if he opens his hand and releases the pickles, he will be freed from the jar. When he learns the truth, the goblin is incensed. He stomps his foot so hard in anger that he shatters into a million pieces.

We live in a world full of clenched fists.

We form fists out of anger, or fear, or love.

The world is unpredictable, and so we hold tightly to the people most dear to us. The world can seem terrifying, and so we hold tightly to our lovelies. The world is unfair, and so we hold tightly to as many pickles as we can get our hands on, just in case. The world feels mean, and so we form fists to harness and direct our anger, to send it somewhere - to strike out.

We clench our fists in order to believe that we have control, that we are safe, that we are strong. A clenched fist tempts us, convinces us we are stronger, better protected. A clenched fist gives us the illusion that we are in charge, that if we hold on tightly enough, we actually can have it all.

Take a moment and clench your fists – feel what that feels like – your heart pounding faster than normal, working to keep your muscles tight, your breath a little more strenuous, oxygenating the blood that is rushing to your muscles, the other parts of your body that may be tensing up as well; your shoulders, your neck. How do you feel?

Strong, powerful – tense?

If we stayed like this for awhile, perhaps you would feel tired. Maybe even a little frustrated.

Now, unclench your fists, and rest your palms on your knees, facing up. Feel what that feels like. How does your body feel? What emotions do you feel?

Maybe a little exposed. Vulnerable. Relaxed, open, calm.

In a clenched-fist world, we must find ways to open our hands.

Because a clenched fist is a full fist. There is no room for anything or anyone else.

Each year, on Yom Kippur, we close our fists and we pound our chests, articulating an alphabet of wrongdoing: Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibaru-dofi.

We join together as a community to admit all of our transgressions, all of the ways in which we missed the mark.

We stand before God and confess: We have trespassed,
We have stolen. We have lied.

On Yom Kippur, we stand before God and if we are being honest with ourselves, we have messed up – we haven't lived up to our own – or God's – expectations. And to admit that out loud is terrifying.

I haven't been the best daughter I can be.

I haven't been the best sibling, or partner, or rabbi I can be.

So we make fists, because we need something to hold on to, because there is a comfort in curling up in a ball, in turning inward, in making ourselves smaller.

The thing is – reciting Ashamnu does not absolve us of our transgressions. Ashamnu does not atone for the ways in which our mistakes and wrong turns have affected others. It only helps us begin the process. As we pound our fists into our chests, we gather in all of the pain we have caused others and ourselves. But in order to do the real work of tshuva, we cannot not stop at ashamnu.

During rabbinical school, I experienced daily prayer for the first time in my life. Each morning, between our first and second class, the Hebrew Union College community gathered for t'filah.

Part of our daily prayer service includes the recitation of Psalm 145, commonly known as "Ashrei."

Like Ashamnu, Psalm 145 is also an alphabetic acrostic, but rather than listing all of our transgressions, the psalm is made up of words that span the alphabet in order to fully describe God's greatness.

Each verse is beautiful, but the rabbis of the Talmud were most interested in verse 16: "*poteach et yadecha, umasbia l'kol chai ratzon* – You open up Your hand, and satisfy all living beings with Your favor."

Some rabbis found this verse so important that they required people to start their recitation over if they completed this verse without proper kavanah, or intention. To help remind people to really embody that intention, it became custom to open one's own hands as one recited this particular verse: [open hands] "*Poteach et yadecha, umasbia l'kol chai ratzon.*"

For 2 days, as we recite Ashamnu, we close our fists and beat our chests.

For the rest of the year, the words of Psalm 145 call on us to live with open hands.

Father Hester, a priest I worked with during my summer hospital chaplaincy internship, tells a story about open hands; about a man who loved his daughter so much that he could not bring himself to visit her as she lay dying in the hospital.

Her illness was terminal. Every moment mattered. Yet he could not find a way to walk into her hospital room. He was so angry, so mad that she was dying, that he could not be near her, and his absence was breaking both of their hearts.

Father Hester happened upon this man in the hospital chapel, praying with his fists clenched together tightly. "What do I do?" sobbed the man to the priest. "I love her so much, so much! It isn't fair!"

Father Hester sat down next to the man. They sat there together in silence for a very long time. And when the man's tears subsided for a few moments, Father Hester spoke.

"There are two ways to love," he said.

"You can love with your fists clenched, like this," and he squeezed his hands into fists that mirrored the man's own hands: "I love you so much I'm never letting you go."

"Or you can love with your hands open," here he opened his hands, "as if to say I love you so much I cannot contain it - regardless of how heartbroken I will be to lose you."

The man nodded silently.

When Father Hester left the chapel a few minutes later, he was still sitting there, fists clenched, head bowed in despair. But the next day when Father Hester made his rounds, he found the man sitting in his daughter's room, laughing at a picture she'd drawn, hands relaxed, fists unclenched.

Father Hester did not tell the man that he was not allowed to love with his hands closed. Father Hester did not ask the man to ignore his anger, or his fear, or his pain. He acknowledged it, gave it a name: he called it love. And then he invited him - whenever he was ready - to open his hands to that love.

So how do we open our hands?

First, we must recognize when we have closed them:

Perhaps we hear someone offer one particular political opinion, and jump straight into metaphorical boxing stance – fists up, ready to fight.

Or, it could be that we loved once, we were loved. And it ended. And so we have decided never to love again - never to even try. Because it isn't worth the pain.

Or maybe countless numbers of humans beings are recklessly murdered in a nightclub, or in a movie theater, or at a country music concert, or at school – and so we don't want to go to school, don't want to send our kids to school because what if they never come home?

We each make our own fists for our own reasons.

In pastoral care, we often talk about “presenting issues” and “underlying issues.” The second step toward an open hand is to uncover the underlying issue. When it comes to fists, those underlying issues usually boil down to fear and sadness.

Even anger can most often be traced back to a socially acceptable form of fear or sadness.

We get scared. Scared of dying, scared of losing those we love.

We get sad. We get sad when we feel alone. We get sad when we find ourselves helpless to alleviate the pain of those we love. We get sad because living is hard, for each of us, in unique and individual ways. And these feelings are real, and there's no fooling ourselves.

And so the third step is to intentionally work - once we are ready - to transform that fear and that sadness, to seek out so much joy and love in the world that it outweighs the fear and sadness.

When we pay attention to the good things, when we catch people doing it right, when we stop and marvel at the tiny intricacies that make the world go around and seek out beauty, we can transform our fear into hope, and our sadness into joy.

Opening our hands happens slowly; one finger at a time. It isn't easy, and it isn't always possible. And I haven't even gotten us to the most difficult part!

The most difficult part, once we have peeled each of our fingers open, is to stay there, but to keep our hands open long enough to feel whatever feelings may come up.

The hardest part is to trust that God, and the universe, and the network of people in our world, together WILL help us do what our clenched fists cannot do by themselves.

God can't keep us from getting scared, but God can be with us as we walk into the fray. The universe won't be able to keep us from getting angry, but the universe can hold our frustrations and our support systems in turn can help us find different perspectives, uncover the fear or sadness that is behind that anger, and help us channel that anger toward making change.

Nothing can keep us safe from the unpredictability of what it means to live our lives. But if we are willing to reach out, and open our hands, we will find ourselves able to better receive whatever it is that life throws at us.

So on Yom Kippur, close your hand, make your fist. Feel what that feels like. Let your body tighten and your blood run faster through your veins. Beat your chest.

And then, after you have prayed Ashamnu, poteach et yadecha - open your hands. Feel the contrast. Engage in the discomfort. Breathe a little deeper.

May this year be the year we open our hands,
to discover new perspectives,
to embrace old friendships,
and to invite in the full experience
of whatever life may bring.