

“Don’t Judge Me for What I Was, but for What I Can Be”

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I recently stumbled upon a book of inspirational prayers and thoughts. One prayer was of particular interest to me. It was a prayer written by a convict, by a criminal on the day of his release from prison.

This was his prayer:

“Please God, when I ride home on the train, help me to keep myself straight and strong as those tracks of steel. Help me to remember, God, when I walk in my front door, how many times I walked through a different kind of door—through a door with bars of steel. When I walk through the park and breathe fresh air and hear the laughter of kids, help me, God, to appreciate how sweet freedom is. When I cash my first paycheck and stop on my way home to buy a shirt or maybe shoes, help me, God, to appreciate my independence.

That’s about it, God, and if you don’t mind me asking, please don’t judge me for what I was, but for what I can be.”

This is the powerful prayer of an “*avarian*”—of a convict, a criminal.

“Please don’t judge me for what I was, but for what I can be.”

Every year we begin the Kol Nidrei service with a very strange declaration: “*Al daat hamakom ve’al daat hakahal. Be’yeshiva shel mala u’vishiva shel mata. Anu matirin lehitpalel im ha’avrianim.*”—“By the authority of the heavenly court and by the authority of

this earthly court; with the consent of God and the consent of this congregation; we hereby declare it permissible to pray with those who have transgressed.”

“*Im ha'avarianim*”—with the criminals and the crooks, the sinners and the outsiders, with those who no longer fit in.

I believe that this phrase carries within it an essential message about teshuva.

This past Rosh Hashana, I spoke about how we come down the mountain. How we relate to our past during this time of teshuva. This evening I would like to explore how we enter the next stage in the process of repentance. How do we break away from the past and prepare to face the future?

To begin with I will contrast two types of personalities, two opposing ways of seeing the world and living in it. One personality type lives in the past, the other lives for the future. One is the *avarian*, the transgressor. The second is the *Ivri*, the Hebrew.

The word “*avarian*” can be derived from the word “*avar*”—the past. To be an “*avarian*” is to be a “past-nick”, to be caught in the past.

The Talmud teaches that if a person sins once, even twice, it is relatively easy for him or her to do teshuvah, to repent, and withdraw from that sin. However, if a person repeats the same sin three times or more, it is very difficult for that person to repent. After three times, the unnatural sin becomes a natural part of a person’s life and personality. After three times, we become “*avarianim*.” We get trapped in repeated patterns of our own behavior.

The past imprisons us.

How many of us think that we're living in the present, when in fact we're living in the past.

The past puts us to sleep and threatens us with paralysis. In the words of Kohelet: "*Ma she'haya, ho se'yhyeh, u'ma sh'neasa, ho sh'yease.*"—"That which occurred, will always occur. That which was done, will always be done." "*Eyn chadash tachat ha'shemesh*"—"There is nothing new beneath the sun."

This is the hopeless prayer of the "*avarian*": "There is nothing new beneath the sun."

In this respect many of us are "*avarianim.*" We are guilty for having bad habits, for espousing the belief that nothing ever changes.

We bite our nails. We easily become desensitized to bad news. We drop one too many white lies. We gossip. We waste precious time.

I would even argue that we become prisoners of other people's bad habits. In the words of the Machzor - "*Aval anachnu ve'avoteinu chatanu*"—"but we, and our parents sinned."

We're quick to anger, because maybe our parents were quick to anger.

We're slow to change, because maybe our parents were slow to change.

We forget to apologize, because maybe we never heard our parents apologize.

We are victims of our own behaviors and patterns of past behaviors. We are “past-nicks”—
“*avarianim*.”

In contrast to the “*avarian*” we find the model of the “*Ivri*.” It is amazing how similar these two words are. “*Avarian*” and “*Ivri*.” The only difference between them is the letter “*nun*.”

The paradigm model of the *Ivri* is Avraham Avinu, known in the Torah as Avraham *haIvri*—
Abraham the Hebrew.

Our rabbis famously explain the meaning of this name. “*Avram HaIvri—sheba me’ever hanahar*.”—“This teaches that he came from the other side of the river.” The name captures at once the essence of Avraham’s life and the life of an *Ivri*.

To be an *Ivri* is to come from the other side of the river, and so naturally, the *Ivri* always leaves something behind. Avraham had to leave his home and his birthplace “*me’artsecha u’ mimoladetcha*.”

We may not be Avraham, but we all have “*ivri*” moments. At some point or other, each one of us has to leave something behind. Each one of us has to leave something *from the past* that we deeply and dearly love, *behind*, in order to move ahead. Bad habits, comforting routines, complex relationships, painful memories, unrealistic dreams. At some point, all of us are asked to sacrifice the past for the sake of the future. Every human being faces the choice presented by the river—to cross or to stay stuck. To be an “*avarian*” or to become an “*ivri*.”

If we choose to become an “*ivri*” then we have to cross the river. We have to answer the call of “*lech-lecha*”—of going forward.

The Hasidic masters teach that on the night before Avraham’s decisive journey to Cnaan, the call of *lech-lecha* was heard around the world. Everybody heard the call. In the morning however, it was dismissed as just a dream. Avraham, on the other hand, well we all know how the story goes...

Tonight, tonight the call of “*lech-lecha*” goes out to all of us again. On Yom Kippur, we are asked to cross the river, to leap beyond the boundaries of actuality towards the undiscovered realms of possibility. On Yom Kippur, like Avraham *haIvri*, we need to go on a journey of discovery and exploration. A journey into the unknown. *Our “lech-lecha”* dares us: I know who you are, but show me who you can be.

We know what kind of spouses we’ve been, but what kind of spouses can we become?

We know what kind of community members we’ve been, but what kind of community members can we become?

We know what kind of parents we’ve been, but what kind of parents can we become?

We know what kind of life we’ve led, but what kind of life can we still lead?

We know the degree to which we’ve been *avaranim*, but what kind of *Ivriim* can we become?

These are only some of the questions Yom Kippur poses to us, as we start the New-Year and leave the past year behind.

The difference between the “*avarian*” and the “*ivri*” is only one letter—the letter *nun*. In *gimatria*, *nun* is fifty. While Paul Simon sings that there are fifty ways to leave your lover—our rabbis teach that there are fifty gates to reach the Lover, the Holy One, God. According to our tradition, there are fifty gates of repentance—fifty ways to reach the All Mighty. Fifty ways to cross the river. The “*avarian*” has the *nun*—we all have fifty ways, countless ways, to reach ahead, to dream forward, to become *Ivriim*.

As each one of us hears God’s Call tonight, let us not forget the prayer of the *avarian*. The moving prayer of the recently released inmate:

“God, please don’t judge me for what I was, but for what I can be.”

Tonight, together we pray:

Please God, don’t judge us for what we’ve been, judge us for what we can become.

Don’t judge us as “*avarianim*,” judge us as “*ivriim*.”

Amen.

