

Erev Yom Kippur 5783 – The Driver and the Duck

There are jokes that start like this: “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

One morning as I was driving, not far from my home, two ducks were crossing the road. Really. Picture three lanes each way on a busy boulevard, and two mallard ducks waddling across. One duck was ahead of the other, and both were missed by the car in the first lane, which had slowed enough to allow the ducks to safely pass through his lane. The car in front of me approached the ducks that were now in the second lane. The driver never slowed down, and drove over the second duck. *The driver never slowed down!*

I was horrified. What could that man have been thinking!!! Is he just mean and evil? I wanted to stop him and say, how could you – you didn’t even slow down! What’s wrong with you? You could have slowed down and let the duck pass. I was fuming.

I’d like to think my reaction was pretty normal. It’s pretty awful to see a small animal or bird hit by our vehicles. I spent more than a few minutes reflecting on this man who drove his car over the duck. Why wasn’t he more careful, why didn’t he stop and show some responsibility?

The question of human responsibility is a topic that begins on the very first pages of Genesis. Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden of Eden. They become parents to Cain and then Abel. The boys grow up, and Cain is a tiller of the soil, and Abel is a keeper of sheep. Cain makes an offering to God, then Abel makes an offering to God, and God accepts Abel’s offering but ignores Cain’s offering. Cain burns, and his face falls. God says to him, “Why are you distressed, and your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.”

Cain kills Abel. God asks Cain, “Where is your brother, Abel?” Cain answers: **לֹא יָדַעְתִּי**
הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי, I don’t know, Am I My Brother’s Keeper?

God banishes Cain from tilling the soil, and becomes a ceaseless wander on the earth (Gen 4:12). **נָע וְנָד יִתְהַיֶּה בְּאֶרֶץ:**

I’d like to think that I understand God’s reaction, that God curses and banishes Cain for killing his brother. I was angry at the man who ran over the duck. We experience anger when we see injustice in the world or experience it ourselves. But this statement, this question, Am I My Brother’s Keeper – this one question reveals the brokenness that is part of the human condition – resisting responsibility for one’s actions and for one another.

Someone else will take care of that. Not my problem. Who me? I didn't do that. It's so-and-so's fault. I didn't know. Turning a blind eye, head in the sand. The expressions go on and on.

In Genesis, it takes generations and generations of conflict, jealousy, and animosity before we see any resolution – Sarah banishes Hagar, Esau and Jacob fight in their mother's womb, Jacob steals Esau's birthright. Jacob is tricked by his uncle who switches Leah for Rachel at their wedding. It is not until Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, shows very clearly that he is his brothers' keeper – becoming second only to Pharaoh, he provides them food, and cares for them and the whole family and many others as well. He declares to his brothers that he has not been wronged by them – that it was God's intention for him to be sent ahead so that he, Joseph, could save lives. I can only imagine that it took a great deal of inner reflection and growth for him to say this. He has done the inner work of *teshuvah*. This is forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph's answer to Am I My Brother's keeper is emphatically, YES. And that essentially is the end of the book of Genesis. So one might say that the entire lesson of Genesis is that Yes, we are responsible for our actions, and, for one another.

This is the message of *teshuvah* and *tikkun*, the purpose of these High Holy Days – *teshuvah* is to do the interior work to return to our truest selves, to let go of our cynicism, hurt, hardness, to shine out into the world the best that we can be. This calls us to develop a constant striving to improve. Improve - How we act, interact, and respond and react to life, and one another. Developing patience, compassion, kindness, humility. Then we can do *tikkun*. But it seems to me that trying to repair relationships without doing the inner work on what drove the breakage to begin with, is bound to end up in more breakage. Therefore, internal change-- *teshuvah*, is necessary before interpersonal *tikkun*. If we do not do the work of internal change, the brokenness within ourselves somehow makes its way into our relationships.

Tikkun comes from the verb *letaken*; to fix or to repair. *Tikkun* is the repair of the brokenness in relationships, and by extension, the world. Apologizing, caring, tzedakah, working for justice, feeding the poor, caring for the stranger, *tikkun* is that, and so much more.

Cain wanted what was not his. The favor God showed Abel sparked a murderous jealousy. Cain wanted to know that he had purpose, that his existence was valid, and valuable. But God dismissed his offering, and Cain felt rejected. We want to know that our existence is valid and valuable, that we have a purpose here.

We may wonder, what is my purpose. We may know exactly what we want to accomplish, what we are striving for. But what is so easy to miss is that we are here *for each other*.

Cain was Abel's older brother. He missed out on his own opportunity to be there – not for himself, but to be there for his younger brother, to perhaps even praise Abel himself.

But we get caught up in our own “stuff” – we forget our purpose, and do not see opportunities when we become angry, jealous, offended, or resentful. We burn inside with anger and resentment, like a fiery substance within a vessel, and we are the vessel, burning from within. From this place we don't ask questions, we don't really talk, and things can escalate horribly. We forget that we are here *for each other*.

Holding onto anger and resentment burdens and harms ourselves and even those around us. In the holiness code of Leviticus 19, we are told, “you shall not hate your fellow in your heart.” And, the sages stated: “Anyone who becomes angry is like one who practices idolatry.” When we realize we are out of control, we can give ourselves a time out (really!), cool down, and give up our desire for revenge. It's not that we condone what happened, it's just untying the knots inside of us, allowing us to be unburdened, to breathe, and we can be our truest selves again. Sometimes, we can pave the way for others to return to their best selves, too.

A story from one of my favorite blogs, Barking Up the Wrong Tree, by Eric Barker¹ illustrates a capacity we may not realize we have:

Mark didn't mean to cut the guy off. The man in the pickup truck honked repeatedly. Mark nodded at him: *Sorry*. But a few minutes later Mark accidentally cut the guy off *again*. And that's when things went sideways...

The man raced his truck forward and blocked Mark's car. With both vehicles now stopped, the guy got out. All six-foot-five and three hundred pounds of him.

The guy started banging his fist on Mark's door. Bellowing at him with rage. Inexplicably, Mark rolled down his window:

“Have you ever had such an awful day that you're just hoping to meet someone who will pull out a gun, shoot you, and put you out of your misery? Are you that someone?”

The man's jaw dropped. *“What?”*

“Yeah, I really mean it. I don't usually cut people off, and I never cut someone off twice. I'm just having a day where no matter what I do or who I meet—including you!—I seem to mess everything up. Are you the person who is going to mercifully put an end to it?”

¹ Blog post by Eric Barker, Barking Up the Wrong Tree, of 9/19/2022. Included here with permission.

The man's demeanor changed instantly. He became calm. Reassuring.

"Hey. C'mon, man. It'll be okay. Really! Just relax, it'll be okay. Everyone has days like this."

They talked for a while. Nicely. The guy got back into his truck. He waved to Mark in the rearview mirror. And drove off.

This guy was ready to murder Mark – and yet seconds later he was reassuring him. Helping him. Now you can argue Mark misled him. Mark wasn't suicidal. But the point is he de-escalated the situation and they both got, ultimately, what they wanted. Mark didn't want to die, and that guy didn't want to go to prison over a traffic incident.

The big takeaway is Mark didn't fall prey to the mistakes we usually make when other people lose their cool. He didn't argue or even try to reason with the guy. And he didn't say, *"Calm down! You're overreacting!"* – a phrase with a success rate that continues to hover around zero.

Instead, Mark *leaned in* to the man's perspective. He did nothing to dispute how the guy saw the current situation.

We think that people with a head full of steam are unpredictable. But that's not true. They very predictably escalate things when we tell them their perspective is wrong. Resistance can be, as they say, "futile." At least initially.

Eric Barker teaches: When we lean *in* to an irrational person's reality – when we accept that *in their mind* their response is reasonable – we can guide them back to sanity. Eric adds: Now this isn't the best angle to take when you're dealing with someone who has a serious personality disorder or someone who is selfishly trying to manipulate you. But with your average person who is just having a bad moment, this can be the best approach. It can help you resolve heated disputes with romantic partners, kids, and co-workers.

For me, a takeaway is that just as you and I know that we ourselves are not rational all the time, because we're not – we cannot expect others to be rational 100% of the time.

We are here for one another. Sometimes a good person is just having a bad day.

Later in the day of the duck disaster, I was looking at a passage from the Talmud, which says, *“Our Rabbis taught: He who judges his neighbor in the scale of merit is himself judged favorably.”* (Talmud – Shabbat 127b).

In reading this, I suddenly realized I had not considered other factors that may have influenced what happened with that driver on the boulevard. Perhaps the driver had looked down at his dashboard or was checking his mirrors, and never saw the duck? There could have been a number of things that may have distracted him. Perhaps he thought it was safer for the human beings around him to risk the duck rather than other people. *Maybe he was just having a bad day.*

The truth is, I will never know. What I do know is that if I only consider that the man is mean and horrible, and maybe even a duck-hater, and never being able to really know what his thinking was, if I just conclude he is evil, that impacts who I am. If we take to heart the Talmud teaching, we will have a more generous outlook, and that impacts how we treat others around us. We have a choice in what we think, and the Talmud reminds us of this capacity within ourselves. We can consider other options in addition to, or instead of, the first thoughts that come to mind. Perhaps the thoughts, we are here *for one another*, and *sometimes a good person is just having a bad day* will come to mind faster now.

There’s another practical lesson in this as well. Our cars are large and fast, and we must always be watching for anything in the road that we might hit. Even backing out of our driveways or a parking spot can be hazardous to those around us. We are here *for one another*. We are our brothers’ keepers.

The duck? As for the duck that the driver ran over, the duck was certainly stunned, but by the time I turned around, to check on it, it had finished rolling, gotten up, shook itself off, and finished crossing the road. It wasn’t a disaster. Hopefully the duck will be smarter next time!

On this, Erev Yom Kippur, may we forgive and be forgiven. May we forgive ourselves. May we do the work of *teshuvah*, returning to our best selves, commit ourselves to *tikkun*, repair. May we know that we always have purpose, *we are here for one another*. *We are our brothers’ keepers.*

May we be written and sealed into the book of life. May God bless us and watch over us.

G’mar chatimah tovah,

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