

Taos Turkey 2023

Once upon a time, the King's son went mad. He thought he was a turkey. He felt compelled to strip off his clothes, and sit under the table, pecking at bits of bread and bones, ignoring the meal that was waiting for him above. Gobble gobble gobble. His father, the King, was beside himself. He called all of his advisors, but none could coax him up from under the table. All sorts of doctors were called to the kingdom, but none could cure the King's son. They gave up in despair. The King, and indeed all the royal household were deeply distressed, until a Wise man came and said, "Let me negotiate with your son. I think I can bring him back to the table. I think I can cure him.

No one had any faith in the process. After all, so many had tried and failed to bring the prince back to his royal self.

What did the Wise man do? He took off all HIS clothes and sat down naked under the table next to the king's son, and also pecked at crumbs and bones. The Prince asked him, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"And what are *you* doing here?" the Wise man replied.

"I am a turkey," said the prince.

"Well, I am also a turkey" said the Wise man. The two of them sat there together like this for some time, until they were used to one another.

Then, the Wise man gave a sign to the advisors watching above, and they threw down some shirts. The Wise man-turkey said to the King's son "So you think you can't wear a shirt? You can wear a shirt and still be a turkey". The two of them put on shirts.

After a while he gave another sign, and they threw them some trousers. Again the Wise man said, "Do you think that if you wear

trousers you can't be a turkey?" They put on some trousers. One by one they put on the rest of their clothes in the same way.

Afterwards, the Wise man gave a sign, and they slipped some human food under the table. Side by side, they ate a full meal. Then the Wise man said to the turkey- prince, "Do you think that a turkey has to sit *under* the table. You can still be a turkey and sit up at the table.

This was how the wise man dealt with the Prince, until he cured him completely. (Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov)

In this story, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov, uses the image of clothing to refer to the mitzvot, the observances that guide us as Jews. On the 'pshat" or simplest level, the wise man is also the rebbe who can "get down" with those of us not living up to our human potential. He throws down a shirt- perhaps attendance at a Yom Kippur service and says:" You can still be a turkey and put on a shirt". You can still argue about why this prayer is in Hebrew, and why this service takes so long, and "put on a shirt" be present, at the table. You can argue about God's existence, and claim that no one hears your prayers, and still put on some pants- and cry out Avinu Malkenu, help me! You can act like a turkey, you can stand eating ice cream directly out of the freezer, sit with your elbows on the table, and still inhabit your royal self.

In the words of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz,(z"l) "Repentance, or tshuvah, is the highest expression of our capacity to choose freely- it is a manifestation of the Divine in us." Do we want to scratch away under the table, or do we wish to embrace our higher selves? According to the Zohar,(Aharei Mot 3:69b-70a) when God created the world, and wanted to create human beings, the angels tried to dissuade Him. "You want to create this human? He is bound to sin against you and provoke

you. If you treat him as he deserves, the world cannot survive, and certainly not humanity". So, before creating the world, the Blessed Holy One created teshuvah, the opportunity for human beings to acknowledge their sins, rectify what can be fixed, ask forgiveness from others and from God. Atonement will be granted, however, only if one is sincere, offering his prayer *from the depths of his heart*.

So here we are, on Yom Kippur Day, the Holy Day when we are invited to embrace *HaMelech*, the King-both God as King, and our own royal selves. This is the day to plumb the depth of our hearts, and we are still under the table pecking at crumbs. Once again, we are munching on that same old "bone of contention" that we can't let go of. Pick Pick Pick. We eat the same unsettled account, over and over again. But I confessed this last year! The Talmud (Yoma 86b) is clear: "Sins which one has confessed on one Day of Atonement, one should not confess on another Day of Atonement. If one did not repeat the sin again, but confessed it again, the Talmud states that "It is as a dog that returns to its vomit. So is the fool who repeats his misdeeds". Yet every year we repeat the same acrostic of turkey behaviors in our confessional prayers.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, debarnu dofi. Sounds a lot like: *Gobblegobblegobble*. We strike our chests as we declare: We have acted wrongly we have been untrue, we have gained unlawfully, we have defamed and harmed others, we have hurt, we have told lies, we have improperly advised, we have covered up the truth.

So, according to our story, Who is the Wise Man and who is the Turkey Prince?

It's YOU.

Each of us is a Wise Man, and each of us is a Prince(or Princess) who spends a lot of time scratching around in the barnyard, when we could be eating at the royal table. In our Jewish vocabulary, each human being holds a “mochin d’gadlut” or expanded consciousness, and a “mochin d’katnut”, the contracted, self -focused consciousness. In current parlance, we might call this our lower and higher self. Both exist within us, but usually, it is that lower self that dominates our lives as we rush around frantically, often exhibiting behaviors that are not appropriate to our royal nature. Our small mind, the “mochin d’katnut” continuously sees imperfections, it judges and criticizes how life is unfolding. Our “Small mind” often ridicules others, and always places the blame somewhere else.

We puff out our chests, full of indignation, and strut around the barnyard, never expanding our perspective. On this Yom Kippur, your expanded consciousness, your mochin d’gadlut, needs to take the reins. Perhaps your brother-in law is has his own reasons for mishandling the family finances. You can put on pants, invite him to your Passover Seder, and still hold your opinion of his behavior. Did your parents mistreat you in any way in your childhood? You can put on a shirt, take care of and honor them, and still believe that they were not good parents- although there probably is another side to the story. The amazing thing is that as you come up to the table and open to a wider perspective, your “*mochin d’gadlut*”, anger and vengeful thinking seem less viable. How much “real estate” are you going to give up for resentment? It hardly seems worth the headspace.

If our inner wise man knows this, why is t’shuvah so difficult? One reason given is that we are trying to do t’shuvah from the comfort zone of stability. Sure, we might like to improve our behavior, but we are hesitant to release those markers that we identify as “self. Some markers are stories we tell ourselves, over and over and over again. “But I’ve always been a turkey, it is so hard to change”. Probably true ,

says Rabbi Nachman, but don't let this realization lead to despair. Often when we first look within, our initial reaction is to become depressed by our failings. But, Nachman asks, how is it possible that one did not do *some* mitzvah, some good deed? Each person therefore must therefore begin by searching within themselves for a point of goodness, and from there, begin to gather all the other points of goodness. Surely, I have one shining quality. And if this is true for me, isn't it true for those I need to forgive as well?

It's not that we don't know the proscribed formula. According to Maimonides, one must confess his or her sins out loud, make proper restitution if necessary, and refrain from repeating the same mistake if the opportunity presents itself again. I am sorry for my foul behavior. I will do my best to repair that which I have broken; your trust, your dignity, your financial security. Simple enough- but we eat the same unsettled account, over and over again, until it sticks in our craw.

Not only that, we say defensively, but I'm right! Why should I compromise, receive what is probably a half-baked apology, or even listen to another side of the story? I know that I am right, and that's the truth.

It is so difficult to listen, especially when we are right. We puff out our chests, full of indignation, and strut around the barnyard, squawking about the lacks in our lives. We are living on potato chips, when we could be eating a gourmet meal. Instead, we are satisfied with crumbs. A crumb of pop psychology, a scrap of Jewish learning. We are satisfied with so little, while a rich meal is waiting above at the table.

A turkey never says thank you. A turkey never prays. What is prayer, but an endless series of "thank you" to our Creator, with a few requests thrown in at appropriate moments. Turkey, by the way, is in Hebrew is

tarnegol hodu, and *hodu* means thanks. The key to accessing our “mochin d’gadlut,” to rising to our higher selves, is gratitude.

There is so little gratitude present these days. In fact, the American political scene at this moment looks like one giant barnyard. Over on the right side, we have an inflated fowl with a big orange coxcomb strutting to and fro, pecking at the other turkeys, rummaging through their garbage, and ridiculing any bird that approaches his perch. Of course, he always has a lewd remark for the chicks. He assumes that no matter how offensive his behavior, he will be the turkey that receives a presidential pardon on Thanksgiving by the White House, if he is not scratching around the Oval office himself. Most distressingly, his behavior has now become a barnyard staple, and accepted by his large flock. “That’s just what turkeys do!” they proclaim. Oh no, one of the younger turkeys over on the left has just admitted to issues with drugs, guns and taxes- but he is still strutting about, his father is a VIT- Very Important Turkey, so why should he change? What was once unthinkable has now become accepted barnyard behavior. Looking up, with an expanded consciousness that acknowledges greater problems such as climate change-it’s getting very warm in the henhouse with all that hot air- is cause for more ridicule and disbelief. No one wears a shirt, much less pants, and the few who have risen to sit at the table have resigned from public service.

And then there are the Kosher Turkeys. The situation in the Israeli turkey coop is so disastrous that I can not address it on this holy day. There is a rich table with Torah, Talmud and three thousand years of learning set above, but instead, the turkeys appear to be eating the shreds of Israel’s Declaration of Independence for their holiday meal. The shortsightedness of kosher turkeys is not limited to Israel however. The New Mexico Jewish Federation, long a supporter of the Taos Jewish Center, disintegrated this year in a huge barnyard fight, feathers flying

everywhere. We are now left, picking through the bones, look for a scrap of funding.

We shake our heads, cluck, cluck, cluck, but what about our own turkey behaviors? Some seem so trite as not to be worth mentioning, but, as my teacher Donniel Hartman likes to say, these are the difference between who we are and who we ought to be. In Hartman's words, some behaviors are *katan alecha*- just too small on you. For example: Did I just cut off the other driver as I made that turn? Did I just zip into the parking spot that the other person was waiting for? Do I talk with a mouth full of food? Sneeze all over others? What about my endless tendency to interrupt? Did I avert my eyes from the person asking for help at the corner? Let's have a few more examples of turkey behaviors ...(ask audience participation)

Just in case we have forgotten something, the liturgy of Yom Kippur provides long shopping lists of turkey behaviors that must change.

Al chet s'chatanu l'fanecha...

For the wrong we have done before you in the closing of the heart... If I open my heart, I might be rejected. Best to stay under the table, nursing old wounds.

For the wrong we have done before you without knowing what we do...

OK, I had a feeling it wasn't so honest, but I didn't really know ...

For the wrong we have done before you through influence of others...

See, it is never really my fault...

For the wrong we have done before you through misuse of food and drink... I have to eat, don't I? Fried is my friend. I feel so much more my full turkey self with a few drinks under my belt, OK, more than a few...

The list goes on, and on..

For the wrong have done before you by promiscuity

But it was love..

For the wrong we have done before you by violence

He pushed me first

For the wrong we have done before you by ugly language

Well, screw you...

V'al kulam, Eloach slichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kapper lanu.

Please God of Mercy, forgive us, grant us atonement.

Out of the depths I call to You, Oh God. (Ps. 130:1) On this Yom Kippur, we have an opportunity for lasting change, but we must call out from the depths, and be honest with ourselves. "Drive by tshuvah", a recitation of a few prayers and a fleeting moment of self-reflection is not enough. The Rabbis of the Talmud compared that facile repetition of sins to entering a mikvah for cleansing while holding on to a lizard, a most unkosher reptile. Today is Yom Kippur, and our cries are heard, but only if they come from the depths of our heart.

Often, it is a crisis that forces us to do tshuvah when our world turns upside down, and we feel that we have no other choice but to change our ways. The barnyard burns down. Our gobbler runs off with another hen. The turkey coop becomes so filthy, so corrupt, so polluted that we are forced to seek other ways.

At those moments, we must look within, rather than blaming everyone else. In the words of the medieval kabbalist, Ibn Falaquera "How can one believe that a person is wise when she is ignorant about herself. Therefore, the knowledge of one's own soul is prior to the knowledge of God."

And so, I pray. Help me to finally know myself, and thereby know You.

Help me to take my place at the royal table, and to stop living on scraps.

From the depths I call you, YHVH, I have no place else to turn.

Help me to change. Help me to ask forgiveness from those whom I have harmed. Help me to forgive those who have wounded me. God, forgive me.

V'Yomer Adonai, s'lachti k'devarecha
And God said, I have forgiven as you have asked.

On this holy day of Yom HaKippurim, in these final hours, we are told that *Etzem hayom m'kapper-The day of Yom Kippur itself brings atonement*, but only if we have truly been able to look within to the deepest depth of our souls and truly ask to change.

And God says, "I have forgiven as you have asked. Come now and take your place at the royal table. Take these last hours of Yom Kippur to truly nourish your soul. Put on your royal garb, your shirt and pants, and know that your teshuvah has been accepted. It is time to leave the barnyard behind and take your place at the table as My partner, for there is so much work to be done in this world.

And so, the last word goes to Leonard Cohen, who now sits comfortably at the royal table. Leonard Cohen, who could talk turkey and speak Godliness all in one breath. He definitely could put on a shirt and still be a turkey. Now, as God's partner, he sings for the lonely, the forgotten, those who are saying "Please don't pass me by". He motions to all of us, - come- Don't Be the person you came in with. Don't be the person you came in with. I beg you, down on my knees-don't be the person you came in with.

Be the change.