

Miracle on the Hudson: We All Need Second Chances

Kol Nide 5777 – 2016

Rabbi Stephen Weiss

B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike OH

They called it the “Miracle on the Hudson,” On January 15, 2009, a US Airways jet took off from La Guardia Airport headed to Charlotte. Shortly after takeoff, a flock of birds flew into the plane destroying both of its engines. Air traffic control wanted to redirect the plane to one of the nearby airports at Teeterboro or Newark. But only Captain “Sully” Sullenberger, seated in the cockpit, could see the truth: the plane had no thrust and had lost too much altitude to reach those runways. In an unprecedented feat of aviation skill, Captain Sullenberger landed the jet successfully on the surface water of the Hudson River, saving all 155 lives of those on board. We are all familiar with the story, which is told in the recently released film, Sully.

Captain Sully was hailed across the country as a great hero. But the National Traffic Safety Board did not see it that way. Locked in their habitual mode of critique, they assumed that Sully could have landed the plane at an airport. Even Sully himself was haunted by his own doubts, reliving the moment over and over again in his mind, asking himself if he should have done anything different. At one point he says to his co-pilot: “I've delivered a million passengers over 40 years in the air but in the end I am going to be judged for 208 seconds.”,

In the end, Captain Sully is vindicated. But as I watched the film, I was captivated by Sully's remark. It raises the question: what if the simulations had proved that Sully had made the *wrong* decision?

What if rather than saving 155 people he had put their lives needlessly at risk? Would his whole career and his life be judged in the end solely by those 208 seconds? Does our life come down to 208 seconds?

Judaism teaches that when we do something wrong or hurtful, we are responsible for our actions. We need to do *teshuvah*: We must ask forgiveness, make amends, and seek to ensure we never do that same thing again.

But Judaism also teaches that every human being is created in God's image and so is inherently good. If that is true, then no one mistake or failing defines us. When we *do* something bad it is not because *we ourselves* are bad. Rather, when we do something bad it is at odds with our true selves.

The process of *teshuvah* begins when we feel the painful dissonance between what we have done and who we truly are. For just that reason, when someone fails us, and comes to us seeking to change, we must be careful not label them by their past actions. We must recognize the good within them and give them a second chance. It is our confidence and belief in their goodness that enables them to change.

And yet too often, like the NTSB in the case of the Miracle on the Hudson, we reflexively assume the worst of others, rather than allow that their action might be the exception and not the rule. “Were you drinking?” the NTSB agent asked Sully. “Ever use drugs?”

Maybe the decision to conduct an emergency landing in the Hudson was the wrong choice, but could someone high on drugs have done such a precarious maneuver successfully? What were they thinking? Why is it in our nature to think the worst of others rather than the best? Why do we not give each other the benefit of the doubt? Why do we not allow for the possibility – no, the reality – that good people sometimes fail, sometimes make bad decisions? Why can't we give each other a second chance? Why is it so hard to give *ourselves* a second chance?

Failure is an inevitable part of life. We all make bad decisions, miss opportunities, fail to live up to promises and expectations, let things fall between the cracks.

If God held us fully accountable for our every one of our failings, we could not stand in God's presence. But God chooses to look past the moment of our sins and to see the good within us. God judges us not by any one deed but by the fullness and complexity of our lives. God looks not just at our past but also at our potential.

That is a lesson even God has to learn, and He learned it from Moses. After the sin of the golden calf, God is so angry that he tells Moses he will destroy the Jewish people. But Moses rebukes God, "if so," he says, "then wipe me from your book." He demands that God forgive the people.

After God agrees to forgive the people, he reveals his truest essence to Moses in the thirteen attributes, which we recite over and over again on this Yom Kippur day. The Lord God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and acquitting. The Hebrew word for gracious – *chen* – means "undeserved kindness." God loves us not *because* of what we do but *despite* what we do. As the great kabbalist Moshe Cordovero taught, even in the very moment that we are sinning and hurting God, God still loves us. And if God can love us even when we stumble, then we need to do the same.

How many of you are Browns fans?

I imagine that on an emotional level, this has to be an especially tough year for the Browns players. Every other major sports team in town has been in their post season this year, most, maybe all – we'll soon see – will have taken a championship. Hockey, Basketball, Baseball, not to mention Heavyweight Boxing. And our poor Browns cannot seem to even win a game. And yet the most beautiful thing is, we are all Browns Fans. Despite their record over the years, the Browns have one of the most loyal fan bases in the entire NFL. You can find Browns Bars all over this country, where loyal fans gather on a regular basis to cheer them on. They live in different cities, often with more successful teams. But they remain loyal to *their* team, the Browns.

That, my friends... that is unconditional love!

The question is: why is it that we are more forgiving and empowering to a football team than to our family and friends, more able to give a second – and third and fourth – chance to the Browns and not to those we work with and live with in our daily lives? When those we love fumble the ball, why we can't we respond not by benching them but by helping them get back into the game?

Let me tell you a story about a famous fumble, not with a football but with a lightbulb. Thomas Edison failed in his first 1000 attempts to create a working model of an incandescent light bulb. When after so many attempts Edison finally figured it out, he crafted that first bulb. It took him 24 hours to assemble that first bulb.

When it was finished, he handed it to a boy who was helping him and asked him to carry it carefully to a room at the top of the stairs. And you know what happened? You guessed it. On the way up the stairs, the boy dropped the bulb, which shattered upon hitting the ground. It took Thomas Edison another 24 hours to construct a replacement bulb. When it was ready, it too needed to be brought to the room at the top of the stairs. Having lost the previous bulb, to whom would Edison entrust this task? Edison handed the bulb to the same young man.

That's what it means to give someone a second chance.

Many of you are familiar with a wonderful French restaurant at Shaker Square known as Edwin's. Our synagogue has a relationship with the restaurant, its workers often speak in our school. Founded by Brandon Chrostowski, Edwin's Leadership and Restaurant Institute hires only ex-convicts who have served time in prison. The restaurant is helping these individuals to rebuild their lives and re-integrate with society. He is giving them a second chance.

Participants in our synagogue's Israel trip this past summer had the chance to eat at a similar restaurant, Liliyot, in Tel Aviv, which provides training in culinary arts, leadership and social responsibility to high school dropouts, giving them a fresh start in life.

And many of you are familiar with and have even visited Havat HaShomer, that unique army base in the Galilee that takes in Israel's most troubled youths, those from broken homes who have dropped out of school, use drugs and even have criminal records, and trains them not just how to be a soldier but how to take their place as responsible adults in society. All of these are examples of programs that offer a second chance to people who have made bad choices in life.

Outside Havat HaShomer there hangs a banner: *Emunah Ba-Adam*: Faith in Humanity. It all boils down to this. Do we have faith in each other? Do we believe in the goodness within each other?

Our tradition teaches that human beings are fundamentally good. If we believe that, truly believe that, then when someone makes a bad decision, lets us down or hurts us we should see that as the aberration and not the norm. We should respond by lifting them up, embracing and empowering them to change.

When someone hurts us, there are two ways that we can respond. Let me illustrate with a story.

A woman in New York City was on her way to work one day on the metro and had a chance encounter with another woman with whom she had gone to high school years before. They had once been good friends, but had lost touch because their lives had taken them in different directions.

They were so pleased to renew their contact that they agreed to meet in a coffee shop after work to catch up.

They became so engrossed in their reunion, however, that they lost track of the time and suddenly realized that they were long past the time their husbands would be expecting them to come home. Promising to call each other the next day, they rushed home to their waiting husbands. The next day, when they spoke on the phone, one of the women said, "Was your husband angry that you were so late coming home?"

"Not at all," her friend replied, "I told him how I had run into you, and that we were so happy to be re-connected that we had got carried away and had forgotten about the time. He was cool with that. How about your husband?"

"Well my husband was so upset that he became historical."

"Historical?" her friend asked. "You mean hysterical, don't you?"

"No, I mean historical. He brought up everything I've done that annoyed him for the past twelve years."

When someone hurts us, or lets us down, we can respond two ways.

We can get historical, lashing out in anger, looking to label the person by their past wrongs, seeing their mistakes as the person rather than seeing the person themselves. Or we can be forgiving and empowering, seeking to help the other person see the best within themselves and rise to their potential.

So my challenge for you this Kol Nidre is this: Ask yourself: To whom will you give a second chance? Who is it in your life that dropped the proverbial lightbulb and left it shattered at your feet? Is it a relative who was not there for you in a time of need? A co-worker who failed to follow through on a commitment to you? A friend who hurt your feelings or cast aspersions upon you?

Does that sound too difficult? To give them a second chance? Not more difficult than landing a jet plane on the Hudson River. When the engines blew, Captain Sully made a choice to do what no one would have believed could have been successful. He did it because he believed it was possible. He did it, because he knew that he had to, and because he knew he had 155 lives in his hands that day.

You and I, we also have lives in our hands every day. And when mid-flight in our lives the engines blow out, we also have choices we make. How we respond to hurt affects not only our lives but the lives of those who hurt us as well. We don't like to think of it in those terms, but it's true.

Anger, vindictiveness, and judgment may feel good for a moment, but they cannot undo a wrong. They only allow the wound to fester. Love and forgiveness, on the other hand, have the power to heal, and empowerment and hope can change our lives and our relationships in extraordinary ways. We have the power to help each other be better, by believing in each other.

They called it the Miracle on the Hudson. This year I wish for us a different kind of miracle. That we may experience the miracle of a second chance in our lives, and the blessing that comes from granting that second chance to others.