**Love and Redemption**

[with thanks to Rabbi Steven Salzman for the Green Stamp reminder]

Remember S&H Green stamps? These were the grocery store precursors of frequent flier air miles. If you shopped at certain grocery stores, you would get a certain number of stamps depending on how much you spent. You would lick the stamps and paste them into little newsprint booklets. When you had enough full booklets you would take them to the local S&H Green Stamp “Redemption” Center where you could would exchange this basically worthless stash of paper for something of more enduring value, like a toaster.

I used to use this image as a way of teaching kids about the concept of Ge’ulah, Redemption – until they no longer knew about Green Stamps and so had no idea what I was talking about. The idea was that toaster was trapped in the redemption center, until you redeemed it by turning in green stamps. Redemption here basically means to free. Our people were slaves in Egypt, until God redeemed us – not with stamps, but with plagues.

There isn’t much risk in trading Green Stamps to get a toaster. You know exactly what you’re getting. But, when you’re not entirely sure that the trade will have a benefit for you, you have to be willing to take a risk. God could not be entirely sure that redeeming the Israelites would lead to success; as it turns out, there were moments in the next forty years that were touch and go. But God was willing to take the risk, out of hope in what the future might hold, and out of love for the Jewish people. Both we and God were the beneficiaries; the Redeemer and the redeemed are both rewarded by the risk.

Of course, the Israelites risked something as well. Life in Egypt was hard, to be sure, but it was a known quantity. Heading out into the wilderness might have been suicide. They too could not be sure what the future might bring, but they were willing to take the risk because they believed in God; they believed that this was a relationship that was worth being a part of. When they reached the Red Sea, the Midrash says that they risked everything to become a free people. They jumped into what looked to them like a sea, but it turned out to be dry land. We know that moving into uncharted or uncomfortable territory always entails some risk. And we also know that if you take that risk, you might emerge on the other side a new person. When it comes to human beings, unlike with Green Stamps and toasters, that risk is at the heart of every redemption.

This, my friends, is one of the central themes of the High Holydays. Tonight, and for the next ten days, each of us has the chance to be redeemed; better yet, to redeem ourselves. We have a chance to exchange our mistakes and our sins for something of more enduring value: a fresh start. A fresh start with God for sure; but perhaps even more importantly, with ourselves and with the people in our lives. Each of us participating tonight has come to this service burdened with the errors of the past year; each of us harbors difficult memories, harmful emotions, mistaken ideas. But the Days of Awe are like a pop-up Redemption Center, and for the next ten days you have the opportunity to hand in all of those negatives and redeem yourself, release yourself from them. You have the opportunity to free yourself to start 5781 with a blank page, unburdened by errors, free of guilt, ready to renew relationships, and open to all of the brilliant possibilities that a new year offers.

As I said a moment ago, ge’ulah, personal redemption, involves some risk, and it is often emotional risk. Human beings are creatures of habit, and we often cling to where we are, to the way things are even when if they are not good. It’s astounding how often we find it difficult, even if we are in a bad place personally, to try something else because it would uncomfortable. So if you want to hand in all the negatives, then like the Israelites at the Red Sea, you are going to have to allow yourself to be vulnerable. Vulnerable before God, vulnerable before the people in your life, vulnerable before yourself. I think that it’s a risk worth taking because in effect this form of ge’ulah, redemption, is the process by which we free ourselves to change our lives. God can help, but it’s up to us to do the work.

Tonight, I want to share with you just one example of what it can look like to take a risk for redemption. I invite you to listen, and then to extrapolate to other areas of your life. The story is about making oneself vulnerable in order to repair a relationship. It happens to be about a husband and wife, but it could apply to any close relationship. The story is called “True Confessions,” written by Yaffa Ganz, and it can be found in her book, “Cinnamon and Myrrh,” which is a collection of Jewish vignettes told from a woman’s perspective.

Yehudit had a fight with her husband on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. She had been busy with holiday preparations for two weeks, and hadn’t had a chance to buy a new dress or hat for the holiday. She had cooked for a solid week to feed all the guests they were having. She hadn’t even gone out for her usual morning walks to enjoy the lovely fall weather. When the day finally arrived, she was exhausted, but filled with expectations. When her husband had begged off Tashlich, preferring to go with his friends rather than with her, she exploded.

Her husband never knew what hit him. Disagreements, annoyances, unsolved problems; all the hurts and frustrations of the past year suddenly rose from the grave and found new life. They came pouring out, threatening to drown her stupefied mate.

When he finally managed to gather his wits, his first reaction was, you guessed it, anger. But rather than responding, he just kept quiet. The only trouble was, so did Yehudit. Through the rest of Rosh Hashanah, and through the next five days they didn’t talk to each other. Now Yom Kippur was approaching, and neither one knew how to end the silence.

Yehudit went to a friend for advice, and this is what her friend said: “You can stay angry as long as you like. He’s only your husband. So what if he’s basically a good man, a considerate husband, a conscientious father, generally a mensch? But remember that there isn’t a man alive who always understands his wife, or the other way around. Besides, your husband is probably in such a state of shell shock right now that he wouldn’t understand even if God spoke to him!”

“So what should I do?” asked Yehudit.

“It’s almost Yom Kippur. Write him your own “Al chet, an apology.”

“I will not!” she huffed. “It’s his fault, not mine!”

“Maybe, but the Al chet is in the plural, remember? Al chet Shechatanu, for the sin we have committed. You both messed up. You’re sorry; he’s sorry; everyone’s sorry. All you have to do is find a way to say it.”

“But why do I have to say it?”

“Who cares who goes first? Just say it.”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll try.”

Yehudit went home and composed an *Al chet*. And this is what she wrote to her husband:

*Al chet shechatanu*: For the sins that we have sinned under the duress of children and cooking and holidays and other household chores.

And for the sin we have sinned willingly out of our own pure obstinate ego.

For the sin we have sinned through hardness of heart when softness would have been wiser and more loving.

And for the sin we have committed without knowledge or understanding, because we are only mortal, ignorant, blundering and sometimes downright stupid.

For the sin we have perpetrated through the utterance of our lips; through harsh speech; and through pure stupidity.

And for the sin of hardheartedness and compulsion, of insisting and being stubborn and high-handed and always right, even when we’re not.

For the sin of insincere confession, of saying “Okay I’m sorry!” when we don’t really mean it, but we just want the satisfaction of being heroic and long-suffering.

And for the sin of not loving enough, of not being considerate enough, of not understanding enough.

For these and all other sins, too numerous to mention, forgive me, my husband, love me, bear with me... as I will, with God’s help, do my utmost to forgive you, love you, bear with you.

Because we are two deficient halves of one potential whole, which can, somehow, transcend the sum of its parts and its sins.

And because I love you, and where there is love, there is understanding. And when love and understanding come together, there is no room left for ego and anger and hardness of heart. There is only room for you and for me and for God.

Friends, this is an *al chet*, a confession and apology which I am fairly certain that each one of us owes to at least one person in our lives. I urge you to use these ten days of awe to redeem the relationship - or relationships – which are stuck. Free yourself and you partner, friend, relative, spouse from the year-full of slights and snubs and insensitivities which have them trapped in a negative cycle. Take the risk. Don’t be a collector of injustices; be a redeemer of relationships. Let’s trade in our rigidity and hardness of heart for flexibility, for understanding and forgiveness. It doesn’t matter who started it; be the one who ends it. Whatever the misunderstanding with someone important in your life, leave it behind, redeem the relationship, free the both of you from the constriction of the argument and open yourself once again, to companionship, to friendship or to love. If it means being vulnerable, take the risk. It’s worth it.

As I said at the beginning, though Yaffa Gantz’ story is about an interpersonal relationship, I think it is easily applied to other relationships. If you are angry with God, imagine yourself making the first overture to get past it. Rather than waiting to hear from God, perhaps you can write an *al chet shechatanu* for the sins we – you and God, have committed against one another. Perhaps that will be the opening you need to redeem your relationship with God.

And if you are angry or disappointed with yourself, write an *al chet*, an apology to yourself for all the ways you hurt yourself, sabotage yourself, treat your mind or your body carelessly or even cruelly. Perhaps this will redeem you from the guilt you are feeling, and free you to get started on whatever self-improvement you most wish to accomplish.

I have shared this all with you tonight, rather than waiting for Yom Kippur, because though we certainly **can** do any of what I’m suggesting at any time of year, the next ten days are filled with possibility we may not feel at another time of year. These are the Days of Awe, when the pop-up Redemption center is open, when we are empowered to make changes in our lives that are so profound that they cannot help but fill us with awe.

This year, when we may have suddenly found ourselves with a little extra time in our day – no commute, groceries arriving at our door – this year is the perfect High Holyday season to do what you may never before been able to do: find the time to do the deep personal work that the Days of Awe require of us if they are to have an impact in our lives.

This year, do the work, take the risk, redeem your life, and by doing this, may we all inscribe and seal ourselves for a New Year of life and blessings.