

## **Rosh Hashanah 5787 - Night 2**

### **"The Things That Stand Between Us"**

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

Unless you're a fan of 90's hip-hop, you'd be excused if you missed a headline from the past few weeks. Finally, thirty years after the murder of influential rapper, Tupac Shakur, the person responsible for his death was found guilty of first-degree murder, and is now awaiting his sentencing, which is expected to be life in prison. While it's amazing that a cold case like this could have been solved after so many years, what I find more remarkable is how this resolution came about in the first place.

Back in the early 90's, Tupac was signed to Death Row records, which was run by someone named Suge Knight, who was associated with the LA street gang, the Bloods. The Bloods had a long-standing feud with a rival street gang: the Crips. And one night in 1996, both groups happened to converge in Las Vegas for a Mike Tyson boxing match. After the match, a brawl broke out between members of the two gangs, with one of the Crips ending up in the hospital. That man's uncle, Duane Davis, just so happened to be top brass in the Crips, and so he ordered and arranged for the murder of Tupac Shakur, who had been involved in the brawl.

For decades, hip-hop fans have questioned what really happened that night, and openly wondered why no one was ever charged with Tupac's murder. But then, in 2019, Duane Davis wrote a memoir, in which he claimed not only to know what happened, but that he was the one who called the shots. The police actually knew this for years, but Davis only disclosed this information in exchange for immunity, as he had assisted the police in their investigations of other gang-related activity. However, now that Davis voluntarily made this information public, there was nothing stopping prosecutors from taking action. Davis's primary argument was that his memoir was simply a fictional story, invented to turn a profit. But the police and prosecutors knew better.

What I find incredible about this story is the sheer hubris that Davis displayed, not only during the trial, but in his willingness to tell his story at all. He sincerely believed he could make his actions public, yet still not have to face any consequences.

But of course, there were outside forces, well beyond his control, that checked his ego, and forced him finally to pay the price. And while Davis still has not expressed any remorse for his involvement in the killing of Tupac Shakur, even if he were to do so at this point, his sincerity would rightfully be called into question.

Whether in an extreme case such as this, or in a far more minor case of wrongdoing, a much more preferable resolution would involve the wrongdoer owning up to their actions, and wholeheartedly committing to both doing - and being - better. But the thing that prevents

such a tidy resolution is hubris. Indeed, true Teshuvah can only be achieved through sincere humility.

Towards the start of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts the events at Sinai for the generation about to enter the Land of Israel. He reminds them about the awesome thunder and lightning, and how the people were so terrified that they asked Moses to intervene, and serve as intermediary between them and God. Moses explains to the people: Anokhi Omed Bein Adonai uVeineikhem — I was standing between you and God. But a Chassidic read of this verse, often attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov, is not that Moses was standing between God and the people, but that "I" or ego stands between us and God. In short, wherever ego – or hubris - remains unchecked, it is impossible to perform true Teshuvah. So how do we begin dismantling this spiritual barrier?

While Maimonides doesn't say so explicitly, I believe his laws on Teshuvah provide the perfect framework for doing just this. He teaches that in order to perform Teshuvah, you must, of course, first be able to admit that you did something wrong. Next, you are required to repay or repair and damage that you caused. And only then, having shown minimal remorse, can you seek forgiveness from the person you wronged. And if that person is unwilling to forgive you? Then you must assemble a group of three witnesses, and approach the person you wronged once more, this time declaring in front of the witnesses that you are sorry, and that you seek the other's forgiveness.

The thread that is common to each of these steps is humility. To be able to admit that you made a mistake requires you to put aside your need to look good. To repay and repair any damage you've caused requires you to understand that another person's rights and needs, at least in this instance, outweigh yours. And to express your remorse to the person you wronged requires you to eat humble pie.

But what about bringing those three witnesses with you when the person you wronged rejects your initial overture? Could they not be seen as an attempt to intimidate that person into accepting your apology? In truth, their role is to heighten the expression of your contrition. It's one thing to admit your fallibility in private, to the one person you wronged. But to gather other people? People whose opinions might matter to you? People who could easily tell others about what you've done? That is an act of true humility, as by admitting fault in front of them, you are making a truly noteworthy sacrifice: your public image and reputation.

It's important to note, however, that this need to humble oneself does not apply solely to the wrongdoer, but also to the person who was wronged. In fact, Maimonides goes on to say that, if after receiving three separate apologies, a person still refuses to forgive the person who wronged them, then that person becomes the one in the wrong. In other words, we are forbidden to let our egos prevent us from accepting another person's sincere apology.

This is indeed what Rosh Hashanah, and the 10 Days of Teshuvah, are all about. Our liturgy and rituals are littered with attempts to humble ourselves. Probably one of the most vivid examples of this is the Grand Aleinu, recited as part of Musaf, and during which we fully

prostrate ourselves on the ground, demonstrating with our actions our willingness to lower ourselves as much as possible.

Of course all of these rituals are intended not just to check our egos, but to make us better people, and better in our relationships with other people, as well as with God. But the only way we can ever hope to become better is by first acknowledging that we are not perfect, that we are not infallible, that we are not blinded by hubris, and that we understand and accept there is always room to grow. In other words, the path towards true Teshuvah can only begin from a place of honest humility.

Shanah Tovah