



## OF GHOSTS AND ANCESTORS

Perhaps the most common global experience of this past year was disruption. Due to lockdowns, social distancing, closures and health protocols the patterns of our lives were disrupted in ways like never before. What was the effect of this change? Were we happier? More fulfilled? Nervous or anxious?

Studies show that despite all of the disruption — our personalities have stayed the course. According to one study from Florida State University, most personality traits showed no change at all. Contrary to most expectations, our underlying personality traits proved quite durable during the disruption. “You can’t get away from yourself,” wrote Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, “by moving from one place to another.” Even when a world changes, the

patterns of our own selves can prove to be quite stubborn.

Whenever I think about teshuvah and change, I return to the thought of famed German Jewish psychoanalyst Hans Loewald. In a 1998 article by Stephen Mitchell entitled, “From Ghosts to Ancestors,” examining the work of Hans Loewald, Mitchell tells the story of a woman named Kate. After a difficult childhood, Kate struggled to develop romantic relationships. She was stuck in a destructive cycle of developing relationships with men who were emotionally unavailable.

Mitchell understood Kate’s cycle of arrested development by referring to Loewald’s description of two relationships we have with our past: As ghosts and ancestors. He writes:

*Those who know ghosts tell us that they long to be released from their ghost-life and led to rest as ancestors. As ancestors they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow-life... In the daylight of analysis the ghosts of the unconscious are laid and led to rest as ancestors whose power is taken over and transformed into the newer intensity of present life...*

Ghosts haunt, ancestors nourish. Our past unattended, unexamined, unredeemed is like a ghost. It lurks in our mind, haunts our present, and sabotages our future. A ghostly past creates cycles of spiritual and emotional dysfunction that can be difficult to escape.

But the remedy can be found in the halakhic notion of teshuva as explained by Rambam. In the

beginning of the second chapter of the Laws of Repentance, Rambam writes:

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה. זה שבא לידו דבר  
שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופרש ולא  
עשה מפני התשובה. לא מיראה ולא מכשלו  
כה.

*Who has reached complete teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his teshuva alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.*

This is a strange formulation. Why would complete repentance require someone to place themselves in the very situation that led them to sin? Ostensibly, that should be the *one* place to be avoided.

Loewald's notion of our past as ghost or ancestor helps shed light on this textual shadow. Without confronting and redeeming our past through teshuva, we are bound to repeat the same cycles of error. Whether literally or figuratively, we will wind up *b'oto makom*, in that very same place that created our spiritual suffering. As Mitchell writes, "each of us weaves and unravels, constructing our relational world to maintain the same dramatic tensions, perpetuating – with many different people as vehicles — the same longings, suspense, revenge, surprises and struggles." Our lives can be cyclical rather than progressive, stuck in the same patterns unable to move forward. No wonder, our underlying personalities remained

intact even through the pandemic. If you were irritable at work before COVID that same unhealthy dynamic entered and exited the pandemic with you as well. When we run away from our ghosts instead of confronting them, they continue to haunt.

How do we lay our ghosts to rest? So often, we are stuck in recurring patterns, the same mistakes, in the same context, with the same people. Escaping these repetitive patterns is not easy. The answer I believe is the primacy we place on conscious action in the process of teshuva. We need to consciously make different choices than before to chart a new path from our past. Teshuva is not just reflection and confession, it is about making new choices, creating a new set of actions. Vidui makes conscious what was previously subconscious. But a full complete teshuva is not realized *on* Yom Kippur but *after* Yom Kippur. It is about forging a new path for our actions that reimagines your past as a roadmap for a new sense of self.

As we approach the Days of Awe, I am thinking about how our past is functioning in our lives. Surely over the past two years, we still have many ghosts. While the world changed, much of the patterns of our self did not, and each of us needs to ask ourselves individually what haunts us? And through teshuva, we can consciously chart a new plan of action and transform our ghosts into ancestors. The experiences of our past can nourish instead of negate. Each of us can and should approach the

coming year with a renewed sense of mission, purpose, and confidence. Allowing our past to nourish and laying our ghosts to rest.

More broadly, I think of this in the context of our community. What role does Judaism play in our lives: Does Judaism feel like a ghost or ancestor? When we think of our religious community and commitments, does it haunt or nourish? Does our relationship with our past upend our relationships in our present? With our family, with our friends, with God?

It seems to me that over the past year, the Yeshiva University community evinced a great deal of spiritual confidence in our leaders, our values, and our responsibility to each other. We saw in our halakhah, history and heritage the ancestors who nourish and sustain our present. And this is important, not just for us. With the polarization of the Jewish people and the broader society, our community and our values are essential for the future. By believing in ourselves, we can best impact those around us. We honor our future by charting a new past, transforming our ghosts into ancestors.

My berakhah to all of you is that we emerge from our past with good health and happiness for a nourishing, enriching, and enlivening new year — each of us ready to create a new future, together.

Shanah tovah u'metukah,

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