

**All We Can Do**  
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The Jewish Center  
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A woman dies and finds herself standing outside the Pearly Gates, being greeted by a ministering angel. "Is this the place I think it is," she asks. "Did I really make it to heaven?"

To which the angel says, "Yes, my dear, these are the Gates to Heaven. But you must do one more thing before you can enter."

"What's that?" she says.

"Spell a word," he says.

"What word?" she asks.

"Any word. It's your choice."

"Well then the word I will spell is love. L-o-v-e."

The angel congratulates her on her good fortune to have made it to Heaven, and asked her if she would mind taking his place at the gates for a few minutes while he went steps away.

"I'd be honored," she says, "but what should I do if someone comes while you are gone?"

The angel reassures her, and instructs her to simply have any newcomers to the Pearly Gates spell a word as she had done.

Sure enough... a man approaches the gates. She realizes it is her ex-husband.

"Wow," he says. "Did I really make it to Heaven?"

To which the woman replies, "Not yet. First: You must spell a word."

"What word?" he asks.

The woman says, "Czechoslovakia."

We spend the better part of our time on Yom Kippur trying to get in. In our case, we plead over and over again for inclusion in the book of life. And on some level we appreciate that our success is a function of our Teshuva. The conventional wisdom is that to the extent we repent sincerely and mend our ways, we'll be written into the ספר החיים.

But what happens if we make it part of the way? Some people like to talk about ½ Shabbat. What about ½ Teshuva? Is there such a thing as Teshuva that's good enough – even if we're not all the way there? Sure: On this day when we dress like angels, we'll do our best to make it as close to the heavenly gates as possible. But our disguise only goes so far. In the divine record books on high, what constitutes success for us mere mortals?

To answer this question, I'd like to think with you for a moment about the book of Yonah, one of the highlights of our liturgy today.

I think we generally assume that the book features so prominently on Yom Kippur because the people of Ninveh serve as a model for repentance. We're not told exactly what they had done wrong, but as soon as they hear the message from Yonah, they immediately correct the error of their ways. Yonah offers one line of prophecy and an entire civilization changes its course.

But what about Yonah himself? What about his capacity for Teshuvah? After all, here was a prophet – a man of God – whose only response to the call of a divine mission was to run in the

other direction. So adamantly does he oppose his mission that he would prefer to die rather than confront it. When a tempest threatens the crew of his ship, he all but volunteers to go overboard. The other sailors do whatever they can: They lighten the load; they pray; they row harder. Yonah goes to sleep, resigned to accept the fate that's befallen him.

So when we find him in the belly of the fish ruminating about his past and his future – when he finally calls out to God – we surely expect to find a prayer of penitence. Inasmuch as he's learned that there's no escaping his destiny, we ought to find a man taking responsibility for his actions.

Except a thorough reading of his Tefillah reveals no such thing. Virtually none of the elements we associate with Teshuva appears in the book.

- Yonah never confesses his sin;
- He never apologizes;
- He expresses no regret; no remorse;
- Nor does he make any commitment to act more virtuously in the future.

He only begrudgingly goes on to perform his mission. And even then bemoans the fact that he had to do so.

In what way, then, is this the story of a Jewish hero?

Perhaps it's this very point that's part of the message we're meant to appreciate today. Heroism isn't dependent on perfection. It's not even dependent on completion. The main thing we need to do is be sure we're moving in the right direction. A little teshuva – imperfect as it may be – is still teshuva. It's true: Yonah's performance leaves much to be desired. But in the end, when faced a second time with the chance to make up for a missed opportunity, he gets right what he had only days earlier gotten wrong. He may have only moved the needle a fraction of a degree; but it was sufficient to warrant a place in the annals of Jewish history.

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe foresees the time when *Benei Yisrael* will be banished from their land on account of their wrongdoing. But ultimately the Jewish people will repent:

ושבת עד ה' אלוךך ושמעת בקולו.

“You will return to the Lord your God and heed His voice” (30:2). Once this happens, Moshe promises, God will return the nation to its homeland.

But then Moshe says something surprising:

וּמָל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-לִבְּךָ, וְאֶת-לִבְּבָנֶיךָ: לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ--לְמַעַן חַיֶּיךָ.

“And the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:5).

Hadn't the people already repented? Isn't that why they'd merited the ingathering of exiles?

Why does the Almighty need to “circumcise” their hearts and inspire them to once again love Hashem?”

The answer is that the Jewish people had done the best they could do. They hadn’t completed their task. Far from it. But beginning the process was sufficient to warrant God’s blessing.

Elmer Bendiner was a navigator in a B-17 during WW II. His memoir is called *The Fall of Fortresses*. On a bombing run over Kassel, Germany, his plane was barraged by flak from Nazi antiaircraft fire. It wasn’t unusual, but on this particular occasion the plane’s gas tanks were hit.

Later, as he reflected on the miracle of a 20 millimeter shell piercing the fuel tank without touching off an explosion, their pilot, Bohn Fawkes, told him it wasn’t quite that simple. On the morning following the raid, Fawkes had gone down to ask the crew chief for the shell as a souvenir of their unbelievable luck.

The crew chief told him that not just one shell, but 11 had been found in the gas tanks. As Bendiner put it: “Eleven unexploded shells where only one was sufficient to blast us out of the sky... It was as if the sea had been parted for us.”

Fawkes was told that the shells had been sent to the armorers to be defused. The armorers told him that intelligence had picked them up. They couldn’t say why intelligence was involved at the time, but the pilot eventually sought out the answer. Apparently when the armorers opened each of those shells, they found no explosive charges. They were as clean as a whistle and just as harmless.

But not all of them were empty. One contained a carefully rolled piece of paper. On it was a note scrawled in Czech. The intelligence people scoured the base for anyone who spoke the language. Eventually they found one. Translated, the note read: “This is all we can do for you now...”

Sometimes even a slave laborer can change the course of history.

Sometimes all we can do for now is plenty.

As Leon Wieseltier once wrote: “I have read of people whose lives are transfigured in an instant. I do not believe that such a transfiguration can happen to me. For what changed those people was not only the instant, but also their subsequent fidelity to the instant.” (Kaddish 61)

Sometimes small gestures change the world; but even when they don’t, they assuredly change us. When it comes to Teshuva – and when it comes to the year ahead – we can’t allow perfection to stand in the way of the good.

It’s so easy to get despondent and become resigned to passively accepting the status quo. But we don’t need to be passive when it comes to our spiritual lives. Even if we don’t see ourselves as Tzaddikim, surely we can do just a little better. As we talked about just a few days ago, maybe it’s our relationship with Shabbat. Maybe it’s our relationship with shul. Or maybe it’s our relationship with a friend or family member.

And neither do we need to remain passive when it comes to our political lives. People have asked whether I'm going to be speaking about politics over the course of the Yamim Noraim. After all, the topic is on everyone's mind. I have only one observation to make and it's this: If things look bad, that's not a reason to become less involved; it's a reason to become more involved. There are a lot of important issues that we care deeply about – and that we're worried about. And there are a lot of reasons to worry. But it's worth remembering what a blessing it is to live in a country where we can matter. We may not be able to elect perfect candidates. But whether we get involved personally in a campaign or whether we partner with AIPAC or other organizations, we can make our voices heard and – even if only in a small way – we can matter.

In a moment we're going to recite Yizkor.

Our memories may be as imperfect as our Teshuva; but neither do we have license to forget. As much as we daven for ourselves and for our families today, we have to see ourselves as part of a larger story – as belonging to the great unfolding chain of Jewish history.

What will be our place within that story? What will be our contribution? A great many sacrifices were made by a great many people just so that a moment would come when we would be able to dream dreams our grandparents never dreamed of dreaming.

It's too early in the year to worry about completing the task; let's just be sure we begin.

Sometimes the best we can do is perfectly good enough.