Gathering Stones

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One Rosh Hashanah after hearing the Rabbi's sermon on taking an accounting of all the transgression one has committed over the year, two individuals approached the Rabbi. One says to the Rabbi, "Rabbi I have thought about it and I have made only one sin this past year, it was a really big one but I have only sinned once. The second person says to the Rabbi, "I haven't really sinned this year, I have probably done a few things here and there but nothing really major." They both then ask the Rabbi, how they should begin the process of Teshuvah, of repentance. The Rabbi replies, to the one who says he committed one big sin in the past year, "Go out into the field and find the largest stone you can, and bring it here to me." To the one who says he has not really sinned, but has made a few small transgressions here and there, the Rabbi says to him, "take this sack and go out into the field and fill it with small stones and pebbles. When it is filled bring it back to me." They both go out into the field. The person with the one big sin, goes to the top of a very high mountain and finds a large boulder. He rolls it easily down the hill to a spot right outside the synagogue. The person with the small sins, roams around the field easily finding many small stones and pebbles to fill the sack. By the end of the day his sack is very heavy and he struggles to carry it back to the Rabbi.

They come before the Rabbi, tired from their labors, and he says to them, "now go and put your stones back where you found them." The one with the large boulder, compalins, "Rabbi I got this stone from on top of a mountain, I know where the mountain is but getting it back up there will not be as easy as it was to get it down. The Rabbi replies, "so it is with the sin you committed, while it is easy to identify what it was, because it was so large it is not so easy to undo and return to its proper place, thus will be the challenge of your Teshuvah."

The one with the sack filled with small rocks and pebbles, also complains, "Rabbi", he says "I cannot possibly remember where I found each of these little stones, how am I expected to be able to put them back if I can't remember where I found them?" The Rabbi answers him, "so it is with all your little sins and transgressions that you say are insignifigant, they can add up to a lot and are easy to loose track of. With so many small sins one can forget exactly who or how you wronged, but in the end each sin must also be apologized for and returned to its proper place. Thus will be the challenge of your Teshuvah."

The lesson of this story is worth restating. Transgressions, big and small each have their own particular difficulty, each present their own unique challenge to the process of Teshuvah. We cannot rightfully say that it is better to sin in a small way rather than a large, or that it is better to have committed one major transgression, than a bunch of small ones. To those that have been touched by our hurtful words and actions this past year the fact that our transgression could be considered a boulder or a small stone is hardly the issue. The issue is the pain we have caused, the issue is the fact that we used a portion of our time here on earth to reach out and hurt rather than heal.

Throughout the year God sits in judgement of our sins, large and small, each transgression placed on a scale and balanced against the good deeds that we have done the realtive weight of that sin, the impact it made in the life of the person or epople it affected is then recorded. But on Rosh Hashanah, God puts aside the scale and picks up a book. In this book every sin that we have committed, every transgression we have made over the past year has been recorded. It is no longer the severity of our sin, that God pass a judegment upon, our sins have already been weighed. No, on Rosh Hashanah <u>we</u> are judged. God sits with pen in hand and judges the individual, not our individual sins. Our tradition teaches that at this time both pebble and stone weight equally before God, the question left

unanswered is wether they are of equal weight to each of us. Do we care as much for the pebbles as we do the boulders? Do we labor to put the large stone back on top of the mountain or do we stick with the small easy stuff? The issue for God is not how big our burden but that we accept it as our burdern to bare.

On Rosh Hashanah morning we read the Unataneh Tokef prayer, a central part of our Rosh Hashana service. The prayer lists all of the judgements that God might record in the record book next to our name. The prayer explains that God records, who shall live and who shall die, who by sword, who by beast, who by hunger who by thirst. The list goes on, it is exhaustive as much as it is terrifying. It gives one the sense that the sinner is doomed, that all hope is lost, that the scale will never be tipped back in our favor. But then in the last two lines the reader discovers hope, a way out of the terrifying judegment, a way to remove the stones that way us down. That way out, is the essence of Teshuvah. We read, But REPENTANCE, PRAYER and CHARITY temper judgment's severe decree.

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It is not the number of stones the person collects, nor is it their relative size or weight that temper God's judgement. But it is the act of putting those stones back, the act of Teshuvah or repentance that ultimately weighs heaviest with God.

At this time of year we are instructed to perform Heshbon Hanefesh, to go out into the field of our soul, our conscience, our memory and find their both the Mitzvah and the aveyrah, the good deed and the transgressions that dot the path we took this past year. In this way we are all stone gathers. Each one of us is commanded to collect the stones of our transgressions. To review either on paper or in our mind's eye the list of deeds we have done and to accept responsibility for those that caused pain. Our task as we prepare for Rosh Hashanah is not only to collect all the

stones of our transgressions but to put them back. To restore them at least to the condition we found them in. It is this act, this act of returning that God looks for in all of us. It is not on the sins which we have committed that we are judged at this time of year, but the quality of our Teshuvah. What God asks of us is not only sl'chot or "I am sorry's" but also repentance. God asks that we take action to heal the hurt that we have created, to show we understand what we have done to others by working to undo it. By getting our hands dirty in the cleaning up of the mess we have created. And even if our transgression has been so great that it appears to like a boulder at the foot of a very large hill, we must at least try to put it back, by bringing it as close as possible to where it once was .

If we make the effort to do this, then our tradition teaches God will look with favor upon us and write us and seal us into the book of life for the coming year. Let us each work and pray for a complete and full Teshuvah, one where we have repaired the hurt and wrong we have done to others, to ourselves and let us leave no stone unturned.