

Recently I viewed the film, “Woman in Gold”, starring the outstanding Helen Mirren and Ryan Reynolds. I was drawn to the film because the major protagonist is a piece of art that I have had on my walls since I was a teen- the Klimt portrait of Adele Bloch-Buyer. I look at her portrait as I write now. Gleaming gold forms circles and palpable textures and patterns surrounding the form of Adele. The gold is flecked with squares of red, orange and green and the woman in the portrait is dressed in a long silver sheath marked with the eyes of the illuminate, or perhaps since Klimt had many Jewish subjects the *aiyn haRah*- the eye worn to keep evil away. And then there is the woman herself. Raven black hair worn in a pompadour, her lips orange red and slightly parted, eyes which stare wide open at the artist. Adele is not seductive; rather there is a sense of weariness about her, the dark circles under her eyes, frail hands intertwined. She is aware that someone is painting her but does not seem to interact with the artist, Gustav Klimt in anyway. Adele Bloch –Bauer was a Jew from a wealthy family. Klimt was a family friend and the Bloch’s owned at least five of his paintings. Here is where the film comes in. *Woman in Gold*, impeccably directed by Simon Curtis, begins in Los Angeles in 1998. Mrs. Altman, the former Maria Bloch, a widowed proprietor of a small dress shop, was lucky enough to escape to America right before they began sending the Jews of Vienna to the concentration camps; hoping the rest of her family would follow. It was not to be. Her parents, the only remaining family in Austria, died at the hands of Hitler, after the Reich confiscated her affluent family’s possessions, including their elegant apartment in Vienna and a lifelong collection of valuable paintings, especially five Gustav Klimt’s that hang in Vienna’s renowned cultural pantheon, the Belvedere Gallery museum, including the world-famous Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer that Klimt painted of her favorite aunt, valued at \$10 million, and now called simply *Woman in Gold*.

When Maria’s last sister dies, Maria finds letters linked to the Nazi theft, and hires a young lawyer to seek art restitution (a recurring legal tangle that currently involves millions of claims). She asks a grandson of her dear Austrian friend, Randy Schoenberg to look into the matter for her. The initial personality clash between the elderly, strong-willed woman and the clean-cut but inexperienced preppie lawyer Randy Schoenberg gradually eases once Randy begins his research, revealing a real-life story of greed and terror more suspenseful than any fiction. Cutting from Mrs. Altman’s predicament, exacerbated by unyielding opposition from the Austrian government, to scenes that unfolded during the Nazi occupation of Vienna, the film brings vibrantly to life a heritage worth defending and a wrong, even the young lawyer believes is worth setting right. Maria’s first trip in over 50 years to her birthplace, Vienna, which she had vowed never to return ends in defeat. With the aid of an Austrian journalist, whose father was an SS soldier and who is trying to desperately create a life of good, from a past of evil, she is able to cut through some of the bureaucratic red tape, open her sister’s will, and open her case for review by the government authorities. Viewing the treasured Klimt canvas in the museum, intercut with the Jewish persecutions, her family’s arrest, and their lost treasures—tracing jewels, artworks and a priceless Stradivarius cello to Hitler’s private resort in the Alps—Mrs. Altman comes face to face with many contemporary points of view, from Austrians who want to leave the past alone, and those who are still tortured by it. Back in California, Maria throws in the towel, but now it’s Randy who refuses to give

up or give in. Searching for the legal loophole that will allow them to sue the Austrian government at home in the U.S., he loses his job, neglects his wife and new baby, and needs money badly. But something within him based on what he learns about his own families' involvement as wealthy Austrian immigrants drives him to regard the art works stolen by the Nazis as the war's last prisoners. Ignoring all attempts to dump Randy for powerful legal forces with deep pockets, Maria and her idealistic attorney make it all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court and the outcome will leave you with a sense of renewed faith and belief in the goodness in humanity. I watched moments of the film and thought constantly of one word- the moment when each character was fully invested in their goal-hineni.

Hineni is echoed in Torah again and again in response to God- here I am as I am. It is a word that the major biblical players are only to understand after a process of self-discovery. They need to understand the true meaning of the word before uttering it aloud. Hineni- here I am as I am.

In the story of the Akaidah which some of us studied together several weeks ago and which we will read in ten days, Abraham responds Hineini in at least three different moments. To God who asks him to offer for a sacrifice et bincha yachida asher ahavtah- his only son whom he loves. To Isaac on the voyage to Mt. Moriah who cries out Avi Avi- my father, my father- somehow knowing what his father plans to do. And finally to the Malach, the Angel – representing a reflection of Abraham himself who is unable to pierce the flesh of his son.

This process of response-a-ability, even for Abraham, is a long and painful one, which started with the first command from God- lech- lecha- go towards yourself. Abraham, like Maria, like Randy in “The Woman in Gold” needed to leave their family homes, the reality of the “perfect bubble” to discover their own identities. They needed to shuv- return to their core- before they could even utter aloud Hineni- here I am- and understand what the depth of the words mean.

During the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are commanded to struggle through the process of teshuvah- a return to self- to the Divine. The process of returning to self is not accomplished through mere willing, it requires work, and sometimes pain, but ultimately results in a more enriched life. It allows us to examine our spiritual and moral whereabouts, measuring the distances we have traveled and distances we have yet to go.

This seems like an overwhelming project to begin and complete in ten days. Perhaps that is why traditional Judaism suggests a much longer period for reflective turning. Jews are encouraged to make *special* time to do teshuvah for the last 30 days of the month of Elul- through Yom Kippur- 40 days all together. We are not commanded to finish the journey before Yom Kippur, only to begin it, so on the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur, we can say Hineni – as it is in the liturgy- and start to understand what it means.

I would like to share with you four mental exercises that facilitate a deeper understanding of self. One: strip down to the bare wood. Two: look in a true to life mirror. Three: wrestle with angels and fight the shadows and four, accept our flaws. All four steps are metaphors for realizing self-potential and helping us to see that we are all creating in the image of the Divine.

Step One: Strip down to the bare wood.

The first thing that people do when restoring old chairs is strip away the layers of paint and shellac to the pure, bare, wood. This is done for two reasons: first to see what the original wood might have looked like, second: to see what the chair might become. We get rid of the residue and layers, which have been covering the chair and try to find the solid, simple original, which is underneath.

We too, like old chairs, need the stripping process every now and again to look at the illusions we have built and see what we have gotten ourselves into. We need to dispose of the excess layers of varnish or paint which keep us living off center, scrape off the residue of anger and cynicism, insecurity and fear, slowly tearing down the protective walls which keep us safe and others at a distance.

Stripping is challenging. It takes sweat worthy work to dig down to the purest form of self. Occasionally, we discover that the person underneath the varnish is not who we thought it would be- too spindly, too weak, misshapen, cowardly- but if we do not engage in the journey, we do not know what our potential may be and we remain stuck as we are, posing as someone else.

Rabbi Art Green tells a story about his time living in Berkeley, California. Around the corner from their family home was a new age bookstore. The front of the store was decorated with a huge sign in inverted pyramid form. The top line read in block letters: Scientology does not work. Beneath that in smaller letters: integral yoga does not work. Then again in smaller letters, Christianity does not work. After going through six or seven would be spiritual paths the sign concludes in giant letters- you work and if you work towards a spiritual path that too works.

Year after year, we hold on to a great deal of spiritual refuge. Before we can make room for growth, we need to admit that are things from our past that we need to release. How we may have behaved in the past year? How we were hurt in the past year? How we felt betrayed in the past year? These need to be acknowledged and then thrown as far away from us as possible. Hold a spiritual garage sale. Price old hopes and fears, determine what is valuable and what we need to keep, and what we can discard. What are the beliefs, prejudices and stresses, obligations and behaviors that we no longer want or need? Whose opinions can we let go? What things have we done to hurt others, what have others done to hurt us? Price them, and put them on the pile to discard. Release everything that no longer serves a purpose- all the guilt, fear, feelings of pain, feelings of lack of belonging. The past is not binding, it does not own us. We own it. And therefore we can determine what to hold on to and what we can let go. Through pricing and releasing old ideas of who we need to be, increasingly, we are left with what is true to ourselves.

Step Two: Looking in a true-to-life mirror

After we have stripped away the protective layers and freed ourselves of some of the emotional baggage, we have the ability to see ourselves as we truly are, face our disappointments and imperfections so that we can create of ourselves something beautiful and different, a new work of art. We are human beings and therefore flawed to the core. But we have the potential to change, transform our flaws into something acceptable to ourselves. The entire process of self-discovery is a paradox. What we imagine we must do in order to change ourselves is often the very force that keeps us where we are. How

else can we explain decades of foiled plans for growth and broken resolutions? Consumed by an apparent passion to be other than who we are, we try to be whom we are not- painting on layers of protective varnish. The goal of therapy is self- discovery, the discovery not of another self but of one's true self.

Beneath all the layers of wanting to be different is who we are. We can accept this face in the mirror or we can pretend to be who we are not.

Six-year-old Sara was dressed for the Purim Parade. She wore a long, flowing blue gown with lighter blue ruffles on the bodice and sleeves. Blue sequined heels donned her small feet, the same sequins that crowned her face covered with red lipstick, red blush and blue eyes shadow. She looked charming dancing around the sanctuary the way a princess might and so I stopped her, "Sara", I asked, "Are you Queen Esther? Nope she replied. Are you Vashti? Nope. Puzzled, I questioned who are you supposed to be? "Oh, Rabbi, she responded in a much more grown up voice than I had ever heard her use before, "I am Sara wearing make-up and my mother's dress- don't you recognize me?"

Step 3: Wrestle with the angels and fight the shadows

When we have sloughed off the pieces of ourselves which we no longer want or need, we are left with the core of self and we become aware that what we fear most is inside of us, not outside, and we begin to fight the shadows. All heroes are called upon to slay the fire-breathing dragon. All apprentices must confront the monster before becoming initiated. It is Moses, our Moses, killing the taskmaster. It is something that takes place in each of us. And it's a process, which takes a very long time because we insist on seeing the demons around us rather than those inside of us. Jon Kabat-Zin interprets the old fairy tales as ancient maps filled with kings and queens, princes and princesses, dwarfs and witches who are aspects of our own psyche, strands of our own being, groping towards fulfillment. We house the ogre and the witch and they must be faced and honored as part of us before they consume us. We condemn those around us who project the rays of our own shadow, afraid to acknowledge that what we hate about them is what we hate in ourselves. As long as we fight the imagine of the taskmaster tooth and nail, as long as we refuse to wrestle with the shadows we will be unable to say Hineni, here I am.

Yet without this struggle, we do not give ourselves the opportunity to return and respond. There are many people to help us with our struggle, whether it is parents, children friends, our Clergy or paid professionals. Somewhere along the way we realize that it is okay to turn to those we trust and ask for help.

The final stage of Teshuvah is accepting who we are and realizing that our flaws make us unique and holy. Our test in life is not be like Moses, rather to become more ourselves. We have one opportunity to be who we are meant to be. Our souls are not the cold perfection of diamond but the tumultuous, organic stuff of creation. Struggle, repent, forgive, take risks, succeed, fail, connect with the past, cast off the past, look at ourselves and make our entire life a work of art. Weave the gold strands with the uncertainties, the shadows, the flaws into a portrait filled with gold, black red, green, orange. Use different tools to create new shapes, new textures and notice that the design is more beautiful than you have ever seen it before, because it is real. Your work of art, which allows you to respond hineni.