

Choosing the Color of Our Lives

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I love when the High Holy Days are late. By then it's fall, and we see the magnificent colors of the fall season all around us. When I see the fall colors of the trees, I think of God the Master Creator of our beautiful world as a kind of painter. I envision that God who worked so carefully all spring and summer to paint exact brush strokes into every flower just so, outlining roses, and coloring daffodils, and designing petunias with just that perfect balance of color and streak of white hinted at between some of the petals, has become kind of tired of all the detail work involved. Then I imagine that by the time the High Holy Days come around, God just kicks over the leftover buckets of paint and the colors pour out and get caught in the tall trees and drip all over to create a different beautiful masterpiece of creation all over again! Inspired by the vision of this beautiful fall day of Yom Kippur, I started thinking about colors and paintings and the true masterpieces all around us.

I'd like to share those thoughts with you in three stories about colors.

The first took place when I was living in Israel during my junior year of college. As part of my program, our class was to spend a few months living

in the southern area of Israel on the Reform movement's Kibbutz Yahel. A kibbutz is a kind of community where everyone who lives there has to work and contribute according to their ability. I was a volunteer on this kibbutz during the time when tomatoes were being harvested, so just about everyone and anyone available had to pitch in with the fields. Before we were sent to pick tomatoes, however, we received a lesson in how to pick tomatoes.

First, you had to be sensitive to the plant. We were told that plants in that area grown in sand are very easy to pull out of the ground and then there would be no more tomatoes from that plant and it would be a loss for the kibbutz. Second, we learned that because the tomatoes are to be shipped to Europe for sale, we had to pick them when they were just a little more red than green. If you picked them too green, then they would not ripen into red; and if you picked them too red, then they would spoil before they got to the European markets, and the people living on the kibbutz would end up eating them! We were told that in a few days we would be back to those same plants to pick the next round that had turned. When our bucket was full, we were instructed to carry it over to the truck and get a new one, and so would go our day.

So my group of young people was set loose into the tomato fields. We were of course being very gentle. No one wanted to be the person to ruin a tomato plant for the rest of the season. And we would carefully examine the tomatoes on the vine, usually picking just a couple that had the perfect balance of red over green and placing them in our buckets. But one guy in our group, Eddie, was moving along through the plants very quickly.

Now you might think this is a good thing, but our supervisor knew better. When the supervisor looked into Eddie's bucket, he was not happy! He asked: "Eddie why are you picking the green tomatoes? Your tomatoes will never turn red for sale, and no one wants to eat your green tomatoes." Eddie was embarrassed that he'd made such a mess of his job. He turned as red as a bright red tomato! Then all of a sudden, Eddie remembered he was red-green color blind: that meant that he couldn't really tell the difference if there was more red than green on his tomatoes. He didn't realize he had been randomly picking tomatoes. The supervisor pulled Eddie off the line, and told Eddie he was still going to have to sit in the field all day anyway because the truck was being used for our tomato buckets.

Then Eddie got an idea. He asked if he could help pick up the buckets when we had filled them, and take them to the truck for us; and he offered to bring back stacks of buckets and place them along the rows. This was great for us because we didn't have to shlep the heavy buckets all the way to the truck either. All day long, you could hear people gleefully calling out "Ready Eddie! Ready Eddie!" when a bucket was filled. Not only did our supervisor make this Eddie's official position for the week, which helped us all; but after that, he made that an official assignment of the tomato field. Long after our group was gone, the official way to get the person to come pick up your bucket remained to holler out—(motion for help) "Ready Eddie!" even if the person's name wasn't Eddie.

What Eddie taught us through his color issues is how to turn a handicap into a helping-cap. He could have held onto that feeling of being embarrassed or continued to feel sorry for himself because he couldn't participate like everyone else, but instead he found a way to contribute what he could to become a blessing for the whole group, and we all appreciated his contribution too.

While circumstances are not always of our choosing, if we try to find that silver lining—that way of taking something that could defeat us, or make us feel badly, and turn it into a way to help others, sometimes we

discover we can still make a big difference. And sometimes that difference is just in helping to lighten another person's load in life. Rather than let our handicap color our world, we can choose the color of our life and make a contribution to lift others.

The second story I want to share with you involves my daughter—many of you know Shira. She recently interviewed for a job with our local paint company, Sherwin Williams. As part of her interview, she was asked: “You know we are a paint company that deals in lots of colors, if you had to pick a color that best describes you right now, which one would it be?”

She told them the color that best describes her in that moment is **“Cheerful Yellow!”** Afterward, I had a chance to ask her about the color she chose for herself. She said she remembered seeing a broadcast room painted that color and was told that they did this to keep the person announcing the Olympics awake, and energized. She told me that though she was feeling nervous and scared in the interview; in that instant she made up her mind to be positive and self-confident and painted her mind with broad strokes of “Cheerful Yellow.” She thought that would be an inspiring color and help get her out of that feeling in her head that could be described as “Emotional Orange,” and that way she'd be putting her best self forward.

Studies show that color has the power to sway our thinking, change our actions, and cause reactions. At any given moment we are influenced by the colors around us, and by a lot of emotions and voices in our head. Some people call those voices our “self talk.” Did you ever talk to yourself? Did you say kind things to yourself that would make you feel good, or mean things to yourself to put yourself down? We can do the kind of self talk that makes us feel overwhelmed and engulfs us with self-doubt, or we can create the kind of conversation in our mind that lifts us up to strive to be the person we really want to be.

Yom Kippur should be a day of building ourselves up! On this day we recall all the time we made mistakes, many of them because we were having conversations in our heads that were not very helpful to ourselves or others. This day helps us to get out from the dark color of self-pity and self-defeat, and moves us to pick a bright color of self-confidence and positive energy. When we examine our deeds and the words we whisper even in our own heads, we discover that we can improve our deeds and our words to become a more cheerful person for ourselves; a warmer family member, and a friendlier person to all the people around us.

Assume in this season you’re being interviewed by God for a position as God’s partner in creation, then self talk yourself into picking the color

that will move you to become the person you want to be. Pick for your inspiration a bright color and keep that color in your mind whenever you need it.

I went to the paint store to see what other colors they had and here are a few of my favorites: Hopeful Pink, Kind Green, Brave Purple, Outgoing Orange, Honest Blue, Cut the Mustard Brown. We could keep that color in our mind when we are talking to ourselves and paint our spirit with the color that inspires us to put our best self forward.

Finally, I want to tell you about a time when my daughter and I went to the Art Museum. To keep our visit interesting I brought along some paper and crayons. Our plan was to look carefully at the pictures around the museum until we found one that we really liked and thought we could draw, and then we'd sit in front of it and try to copy it using our paper and crayons. The picture we decided to draw contained some of our favorite fruits and a glass containing water. The fruits weren't too hard to draw: orange for an orange, green to make the green apple, purple grapes, so we used our purple crayon. But when we attempted to draw the crystal glass beside it, we started having some trouble. It's hard to draw crystal without giving it a color, and then filling it with a clear liquid became an

even more difficult concept to illustrate. It was then that we came to appreciate the true mastery of the artist and learned a powerful lesson in art appreciation.

As we left the Art Museum, we started talking about what we should do with our pictures. Even though our pictures did not do justice to the beautiful art work that inspired them, we decided to share them with the residents at the nursing home who would appreciate our efforts and even more so the story about our adventure. That's when we realized it wasn't our talents or lack thereof that mattered; it was how we used our efforts to make someone else's day.

People of all ages enjoy coloring, enjoy the company of others while coloring, or even just appreciate the beauty or effort that a person puts into their drawing. One of the most popular books on the New York Times Best sellers is a coloring book. Some people say it's their therapy to sit and color. Deciding what to do with our art work made us realize that maybe we could sit and color with a grandparent or a resident in nursing home, and share our artwork and love of art with others. Sharing a box of crayons, we can be the person who creates a real picture of people laughing and smiling together. Then we won't have to figure out what color to use to draw a tear, because we will have discovered a way to wipe away

the loneliness. With the challenge of that clear glass of clear liquid we toast l'chayim--to making other people's lives sweeter!

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that “We should live our lives as if they were works of art. Every act is like a brush stroke and every thought a color. Together and over time, we create of our deeds the masterpiece of our lives.”

This Yom Kippur, let’s carefully choose the colors we want to see in the masterpiece of our life! Let’s vow to take something unfortunate and color it into a blessing for others. Let’s wrap ourselves in colors that inspire good conversations in our head and in our deeds. And let’s appreciate that every masterpiece has something to teach us and is worthy of sharing with someone who needs our cheerful presence. This day, let’s choose the color of our lives and live it! Amen.