

Rosh Hashanah 5768
Teshuvah – Unsticking Ourselves
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Several months ago, a college classmate of mine died after two years of struggling heroically with breast cancer. Before the funeral, hundreds and hundreds of people waited outside the synagogue in a four column line around the building that looked like the half price Broadway ticket line in Times Square, for the sheer enormity of the crowd. My friend's mother and father both spoke, and the whole room cried and trembled -- beautiful angel... 33 years old... unspeakable tragedy... brilliant... perfect faith... revolutionary... eishet hayil. We were nearly paralyzed by the depth of the loss -- to this family and to the world. But just when we thought it could be no more painful, my friend's bereaved husband, the man who stood by her side through chemo, surgeries, radiation, arose to speak, their two daughters, 3 and 5 years old, in his arms. "I promise you today," he said, "that I will devote every ounce of my strength, for the rest of my life, to making sure that these girls know who you were in the world." As he went on to describe her most exquisite characteristics, now bequeathed through his devotion to their daughters, I remember thinking, "This could be the moment that changes my life." Hearing about this beautiful soul, her courage, her integrity, her devotion to her family, her ability to glide between the secular and religious worlds without judgment or angst, her unwillingness to let her imminent death steal from her one ounce of joy in her life... I thought that maybe the only way to recover the tragic loss to the Jewish people, to the world that occurred when she died, would be for every single one of us to leave that funeral with a commitment to change our lives, to prioritize, to reaffirm, to reconnect.

Last night we talked about Rav Amnon of Mainz, the brilliant young rabbi who stood on the cusp of death and whispered the words that serve as the centerpiece of our High Holy Day liturgy: Who will live and who will die? -- jolting us into an awareness of the brevity and capriciousness of life. We talked about his insistence that the inevitability of death not lead to hedonism or escapism, but rather to a life of purpose, meaning and celebration, a life of *teshuvah* -- personal transformation and healing, of *tefillah* -- heartfelt encounter with the Mystery of the universe, and *tzedakah* -- dogged, unapologetic pursuit of justice in the world. This morning, we will focus on the first of the three, *teshuvah* -- the possibility of change and transformation, that fundamental Jewish promise that keeps us from becoming static, stagnant beings, dwelling interminably in the mistakes of the past. It is *teshuvah* that affirms that life is dynamic and people change, that forgiveness is possible, that we can open our hearts and replace resentment with compassionate understanding, we can reconcile, even after bitter and acrimonious rifts have torn us apart, even after resentments have simmered for years. We can heal, and we can allow others to heal.

We come here each year -- some of us hoping for an infusion of spiritual strength, many of us hoping to connect to something meaningful, some of us hoping to relieve ourselves of the guilt of ignoring our Jewish lives or our spirits the rest of the year. I suspect that most of us are aware on some level that our lives are not everything they could be, that we don't actually have everything we want -- and I don't mean the Magnetic Grey Prius we want but don't yet have -- I mean that on some fundamental level something eludes us -- whether it be our work, our partnership, our family relationships. I believe that this is a moment of radical possibility, that each of us could walk out of here a different person than we were when we came in. But in order for that to work, we need to have the courage to look at our lives with brutal honesty. We need be prepared to ask the questions of ourselves that we are terrified to ask. We need to think freely and concretely about what needs to change. And we need to consider what we are willing to do about it.

When toddlers play together, they often sit beside one another, share toys, take interest in the same things, but “rather than relate to each other, they relate to a common activity which they do in parallel.” It’s called parallel play. I once heard marriage described as grown ups doing parallel play: two partners share a home, maybe some kids, a couple of cars, but they don’t ever really connect with one another any more.¹ *If the person you wake up in bed with every morning feels like a stranger, something in your life needs to change.*

I recently read about a historic graveyard in Canada in which there is a headstone inscribed: “Here lies George Brown. Born a man, died a gastroenterologist.”² *If your whole life is defined by what you do, rather than who you are, something needs to change.*

Every day for the past several months, the LA times has been publishing half page obits on each soldier from California killed in the devastating war in Iraq. *If you care more about the lives of David Beckham and his Spice Girl wife than the deaths of Staff Sgt. Jason L. Paton, 25 and Army Pvt. Shane M. Stinson, 23 -- both of whom were killed last week in Iraq, then something needs to change.*

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, one of the early pioneers in the mind/body holistic health movement, writes a story about her father, a man consumed with his own bad luck. One day, he won the lottery. Terrified that someone would steal the winning ticket, he taped it to his chest, refusing to redeem it. Eventually, as the deadline for collection of funds approached, he redeemed the ticket, but never spent the money because he was afraid that when he did, people would know he had wealth, which would make them want to take advantage of him. In this way, even a winning lottery ticket is turned into a “misfortune, a source of grief, anxiety and stress.”³ I resonate with this story - my parents told me they once met a man whose motto in life is: “You are only as happy as your least happy child.” In other words, it’s ok that I’m not satisfied with my life, one of my kids still struggles in the world. *If you spend your time looking for excuses to not live, for justifications to be deeply disappointed by life, something has got to change.*

OK, easy to say that something has got to change, but change is brutal, crushing, and sometimes impossible. I feel stuck. I feel paralyzed by my situation. While I appreciate the claim that all people have free will, I couldn’t feel less free to resolve the conflicts in my marriage/ work/ relationship/ life.

But the idea that we have the opportunity to make change in our lives is no casual claim. This is the essential principle of Torah and the Jewish tradition: human beings, created in God’s image, have innate dignity and worth, have free will and therefore the capacity, even the obligation, to create and recreate themselves. This is what Buber calls “a force divine,” found within every single person. As my friend and teacher Rabbi Shai Held teaches, the greatest heresy in Judaism is to believe that the world must be as the world is. On the contrary, to be a covenantal Jew is to be certain that neither our lives nor the world is static. It is *always* possible for things to be different than they are.

1 See Remen, Dr. Rachel Naomi, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, p. 158.

2 *ibid.*, p. 42.

3 *ibid.*, p. 85.

But Rabbi, you don't know my situation. You don't know how complicated my life is, how deep the entanglements, how debilitating change would be. It doesn't matter how many texts you quote to me, you are naive to think that change is possible in my situation.

Yet it was Viktor Frankl, the psychoanalyst, survivor of Auschwitz, who taught us, not from commitments derived from the study of ancient texts, but from an understanding of humanity after living through one of the darkest and ugliest chapters of human history -- that human beings *always* have a choice of action. People “*can* preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical distress.” Frankl writes of those heroic souls who overcame the apathy, irritability, selfishness that naturally came to characterize prisoners living under such extreme circumstances -- those people who would “walk through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.” It is these people, Frankl asserts, who “offer us sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” And even in Auschwitz, he assures us, there were always choices to be made.

“Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom... Fundamentally, therefore, any person can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him -- mentally and spiritually.”⁴

Is it true that each one of us has inner freedom, and that every single moment of our lives offers us the ability to make a choice? If that is the promise of *teshuvah*, then why are so many of us so stuck?

Before my friend and teacher Reverend Ed Bacon moved to California years ago, a member of his church commissioned an oil portrait of him to hang in the Cathedral where he had served. When the portrait was only half done, they discovered that it was too large for the spot reserved for it in the Cathedral and therefore the painter would have to start again, this time creating a smaller piece. What would they do with the oversized, half finished piece? A member of the church decided to buy it and offer it to Reverend Bacon as a going away gift. The portraitist refused. The member insisted. “But, ma'am,” the artist argued, “the painting is not finished!” “That's ok,” she said, “Ed is not finished either.” He sold her the painting and it now hangs in Reverend Bacon's home.⁵

Perhaps the reason that so many of us choose not to unstick ourselves, choose not to heal the relationships that have been tearing at the fabric of our being for years, choose not to forgive, choose not to ask for forgiveness, choose not to change, is because we believe that we are already finished. That who we are now is who we must be. That we are so entrenched that there is no way to start anew. But that is precisely what Rosh Hashannah -- Yom HaZikaron -- is about. *Hayom harat olam* -- we are here today, on this Rosh Hashannah, to commemorate the birthday of the world. What does that mean? We do our annual soul check-up precisely at the moment when the calendar tells us to think CREATION and RECREATION! As Rav Soloveitchik teaches, “the most fundamental principle is that a person must create himself.”⁶ Don't feel constrained by what is, dream of what could be. Don't bemoan what you have not become; work to become the person

4 Frankl, Viktor, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 75.

5 Bacon, Rev. J. Edwin, Jr., *God Mend Thine Every Flaw*, July 1, 2007.

6 Soloveitchik, Rav Joseph, *Halakhic Man*, p. 109.

God put you into the world to be. Don't sit and suffer through reality, create a new reality for yourself. We can't wait passively for someone else, whether it is Gd, our parents, or our president and congress, to create the world we want to live in. On the contrary, it is our *duty*, as human beings, to work with all of our strength to create that reality.

Jerry Long was 17 years old when he was in a horrible driving accident and left paralyzed from his neck down. Three years after the accident, Long uses a mouth stick to type. He takes two classes at Community College, and spends his days writing and reading. He writes to Frankl: "I view my life as being abundant with meaning and purpose... *I broke my neck, it didn't break me.* I am currently enrolled in my first psychology course in college. I believe that my handicap will only enhance my ability to help others. I know that without the suffering, the growth that I have achieved would have been impossible."⁷

If we are to take the promise of *teshuvah* seriously, the promise of return, redemption, of forgiveness and healing; if we are ever to achieve a measure of spiritual mobility in our lives, we must be willing to *not* be stuck, to *not* be finished. We must be open to hear the eulogies for a young woman, her body riddled with cancer, who would have done anything for another hour with her children, when we give away those precious hours with the people we love without blinking an eye. We have to be willing to change our lives, to unstick ourselves, to forgive ourselves, to forgive someone else, to choose life; and it is *teshuvah* that gives us the power to do so!

We spoke earlier about the chasm most of us feel between who we are and who we believe we ought to be; between what our marriage looks like, and what we had hoped it would; between what the depth of our political/ spiritual/ intellectual engagement is, and what it ought to be. Frankl argues that some disequilibrium -- some chasm between what is and what ought to be, is actually at the heart of a healthy spiritual and emotional life, as long as it motivates us to work toward the lives we aspire to. Yamim Noraim force us to wake up and feel the existential unease, to get profoundly uncomfortable, then to use our innate spiritual freedom to realign our lives.

The Netivot Shalom teaches that the very moment that a person makes *teshuvah*, he is born, like a newborn, because *teshuvah* has the power to effect complete transformation. **התשובה היא שינוי המציאות**-- *Teshuvah* transforms reality.⁸ May we today, in all our complexities and with all our entanglements and complications, discover within ourselves a spiritual freedom that nobody can take away, a freedom that endows us with the ability to change. And let us find the strength to take the first decisive steps toward the achievement of that freedom and the realization of the lives and world we dream of.

Shanah Tovah.

7 Frankl, p. 148.

8 Netivot Shalom, *Teshuvah* intro.