

Integrity and Change
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On Rosh Hashanah morning, I told you integrity is my most important value.

I learned it from my dad, who I think is the embodiment of integrity.

To me, integrity is about being honest enough and humble enough to admit when you're wrong, to change course when things aren't working, to apologize when you hurt someone, and to change your mind when you learn something new.

For most of us, integrity is something we have to learn.

In the political world where I started my career, changing your mind is seen as weak and inauthentic.

Next time you listen to a politician answer questions, pay attention to how they inevitably respond with something like, "Well, as I've *always* said ..."

That word "always" is a signal to the audience that "*you can trust me because I'm consistent.*"

Maybe that's why working in DC kindled my interest in Judaism.

Our tradition *doesn't* see consistency for its own sake as a virtue.

In Judaism, change is the name of the game. Changing ourselves is an indicator of strength and authenticity.

Because it is only when we're able and willing to change that we can grow and become better human beings.

The Talmud says God created *t'shuvah* before creating humankind or even the world itself.¹ We are flawed by design—always a work in progress.

But it's not easy to change your mind or your way of doing things. Even when you want to, there are barriers to overcome.

One is that, as we'll say a lot during Yom Kippur, we are "stiff-necked" people.

¹ b. Pesachim 54a.

We're great at seeing what others do wrong but, like someone who can't move their neck, we have a hard time looking at ourselves.

The first step in *t'shuvah* is *cheshbon hanefesh*—an honest accounting of the soul:

Who am I?

Who do I hope to be?

Where have I come up short?

How have my actions impacted other people?

And what do I need to do to be better?

If you don't look, you can't see. And if you can't see yourself, you can't change.

So, our task the next few days is to focus on these questions.

It will be uncomfortable, but that's okay. Sometimes integrity calls us to walk barefoot on a rocky path.

Another barrier to change is the expectations other people hold of us.

We each have a persona we've built over time, and people come to know us in a certain way.

Sometimes, changes in our attitudes or behaviors can be jarring, especially for those we're closest to.

I have experienced this personally in the past year in my work as your rabbi.

In response to events that I perceived as ruptures in the world and in my own life, I began speaking out publicly about immigration, Christian nationalism, *tikkun olam*, fairness, and justice in ways I never had before.

Some of you appreciate it; others don't.

But I learned: the stakes are high when you show up differently than the way people expect you to.

Change can destabilize our relationships with friends, family, co-workers, and others. So, psychologically, we tend to resist it.

Perhaps the lesson is that the expectations that matter most are the ones you have of yourself.

The biggest barrier to change, though, might be our past.

Parents, teachers, environment, experience, and brain chemistry are just some of the factors that contribute to the formation of our personality.

These are strong forces. They impact the choices we make and the way we respond to situations we face.

None of us is ever a clean slate.

To some degree, our past constrains our ability to shape our future.

But only to some degree.

God gave us free will and empowered us to be the “architects” of our own life.²

The thing to know is that our capacity for change does not lie in the ability to *conquer* our past.

It lies in the power to *harness* our past and use it to fashion the life we want going forward.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

*Every instant is like a thread
raveling out of eternity to form a delicate tassel.
We must not cast off the threads,
but weave them into the design of an eternal fabric.*

Only by embracing who you are and all that got you here—the good as well as the bad—can you ever hope to become the person you want to be.

That’s what it means to live with integrity.

² See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 173-174.