

I heard an average person spends about 4 months of their life waiting at red lights. Four months! That's just the official number—if you count remember where you parked the car at COSTCO or looking in your car for where you put your sunglasses it's probably closer to a year. The thing is we spend so much of our lives on the move, between here and there, stopping, starting again. Getting ready. Making sure we have the proper instructions and the right supplies. Sometimes, in all that motion, what we really need is not just another green light to help us sail through... but a genuine pause, a moment we are finally not on the move, and just are staying still, that is what steadies us.

There's a term for that: a still point. A "still point" is a moment of inner calm, a quiet center, even when life is busy turning all around us. We take a temporary moment of stillness, focus or quiet within a larger and deeper process. A still point is also defined by clinicians as a temporary pause in craniosacral rhythm during a therapy session; and philosophers indicate it is the idea of a motionless center around which life continues to revolve. Maybe we could see Shabbat Shuvah as a still point— a time to rest and take a beat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Between the blast of the shofar that woke us up, and the day of atonement that asks us to lay our souls bare and admit the harm in which we've been a part. This is the time to pay attention to what needs renewal. But since a still point is still a new concept to me, I'd suggest a more accessible image: *Shabbat Shuvah* is an oil change.

When you own a car, you don't think about oil every day. It's out of sight and mind. But the oil gets thick and dirty. If you don't change the oil, the car strains. Push too long, and the engine can seize up. Our hearts & souls work the same way. If we don't pay attention, resentments congeal, anger and shame build up, small dishonesties corrode our spirit, and Self-doubt and guilt circulate long past their use. And at first, nothing happens—we keep moving forward. But inside, our spirits strain. *Shabbat Shuvah* the Sabbath of Return, tells us to be still. Only then will we pay attention enough to know it is time to look under the hood, and ask: What needs to be drained? What refilled? What looks like it needs attention? What needs attention even though it looks just fine? The prophet Hosea, whom we study on Shabbat Shuvah, says: "Return, O Israel, to Adonai your God, for you've stumbled in your iniquity. Take your words with you and return." Notice: Hosea doesn't say "bring sacrifices." Instead, "bring words."

I think Hosea is directing us to speak with honesty. Admit what is broken or corroded. Drain it. Replace it. Then respond to corrosion and broken pieces and blockages with key practices: teshuvah, tefilah, tzedakah—repentance, prayer, acts of justice and generosity. These are what loosen the sludge. You want to do these practices right? They require words. You've got to be honest in what you admit and responsible for what you've said. These enable you to get beneath the outer evidence of corrosion to do the work of getting our internal systems renewed. The Baal Shem Tov, a 17th century prominent Hasidic Rebbe, taught about the risks of performing teshuvah, t'fila and tzedekah on the High Holy Days. He said that the soul is like a flame. When we don't live in alignment or with sincerity in our prayer or truth to the pledges of generosity we've made, or when we offer to repent with no intention of delivering on our promise,

then soot gathers on the wick of our internal flame and this dims the light we manifest. The work we must do then is to clear away the soot.

Contemporary Rabbi Sharon Brous is the founding rabbi of a community called Ikar in Los Angeles. She was actually interviewed last spring by Rabbi Muhlbaum at a major community event held in our sanctuary. Rabbi Brous offers a similar teaching to the Baal Shem Tov but meant for our era in modernity. She believes teshuvah is not about becoming someone new—it's uncovering who we already are. Our tenderness, our holy intentions and willingness to practice authenticity in our mitzvot has always been part of our humanity—it's just hidden under buildup. And sources in secular society and other faiths concur. Author and Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön endorses the work of repentance as pivotal. She writes: "The most fundamental harm we do to ourselves is remaining unaware of what's happening inside us. To look clearly at anger, fear, and attachment, and to respond with compassion is the real work of transformation."

These voices all remind us: renewal and repentance aren't about perfection. They are ways of noticing what clogs us, what drains us, and what sparks potential resentment and fear of being hurt. Then it involves taking the time to reinfuse into our spirits what is true, affirming and life-giving. I've learned this personally many times in my life. But just a few months ago, I got a strong reminder!

You see, I was carrying around for several days the yuck of human resentments that built up inside me in one domain of my life and where I hadn't processed them. The actual sources of resentment weren't huge. They were perceived slights. Yet small perceived slights do have a way of feeling harder to take than actual intended slights and signs of disrespect! I was seeing others expressing views different than mine as acting with aggression to me. It didn't matter whether the people involved intended to slight me. I perceived it that way. It festered. A good response would have been pausing, breathing, taking a beat. That wasn't what I did. My choice was something much more productive. I fired off very strongly worded texts asserting in clear terms to folks that their choices were damaging and insulting me. As you know, the best way to clear up a truly sensitive and potentially high-stakes human situation is to send fiercely written text messages impulsively to dampen resentment between parties. That always works! It's way better than speaking face to face and patiently coming to resolution. Right?

Wrong. Of course not. I'm grateful to say that a friend involved in the situation called me to account. They believed in me. They trusted my record of taking responsibility when I've done something out of character or reflecting poorly on me. They did so privately and in accordance with Jewish tradition about rebuking someone without causing them humiliation. In short, they showed me in the mirror what my self-righteousness looks like and how desperate I appeared, in these texts to be more virtuous and right than those receiving my messages. For calling me to account and believing in me, I am so grateful. I'm also proud of myself for having earned with that a belief that I would listen to them and look at repercussions of errant conduct. When a friend is willing to have that caring confrontation with you, it has an analog during an oil change when the technician shows you the grimy air filter you've been using. They have you open your window and they stick it in front of you, asking: "You want to

replace this?” It seems like a straightforward question. But the tech really is making a point: Do any of us really want to keep breathing dirt and gook and bacteria into our systems? Is that what we want? Or do we want to take breaths that are cleansing in air that is fresh and purified? On Shabbat Shuvah, a new filter seems worth the investment. For what exactly do we want circulating within us? Old grudges, vanity, pride? Or patience, kindness, honesty, and generosity? If we contemplate that choice long enough, Shabbat Shuvah will really be a still point, a calm that transcends the commotion of our ten days of awe. It takes practice, as our internal drive to avenge being knocked around can seize our spirits and then we get absolutely nowhere!

My beautiful wife Joanie Berger is here tonight, and I believe she is cracking up as she hears me pontificate about what happens under the hood of the car including oil changes and filters. She is the engineer of our family, and she knows far more than I do about what actually happens under the hood. It is worth adding that as a trained social worker and incredibly humane friend to so many people, she knows what to look for under the hood of human souls. She sees what particles of “yuck” circulate and is an expert communicator. She sees what needs attention to avoid damaging the parties involved. She patiently helps me figure out what needs attention on my own.

As a rabbi, I have pretty good instincts, but no clinical training for the social work. Nor do I have a ‘head’ for what engineering principles actually propel a car to be able to move forward. What my training, my studies and my career have taught me is this: Judaism gives its adherents tools to change the oil in our souls. The tools have a Hebrew name: middot. Middot are virtues and values Jews practice every day: patience, kindness, discretion, generosity, honesty, courage. It takes careful thoughtful practice to act from a place of ometz lev (courage) to address human conflicts. We must practice to get absolute emet, honesty and truth into every meeting. Judaism encourages us to hold hold tight to our middot, as life’s events will bump into and bruise us. Judaism figures that most every person would want goodness and mercy in them to spill out alongside their humility and patience, if someone bumped into them. Resentment or paranoia or the yuck of feeling more deserving than anyone else hardly assures us a smooth ride ahead.

The Talmud demonstrates underscores how important it is to do teshuvah when we’ve committed wrongdoing. We learn: “In the place where those who have performed true teshuvah stand, even those who are completely righteous from the beginning, they cannot stand in that same place.” In this instruction, our sages were reminding us we don’t need to be perfect. We just need to notice what’s flowing inside and take responsibility for what is emerging from us. Teshuvah is the home base of faith, and being able to do teshuvah properly is life’s objective.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reassures us by writing that “Repentance is not an act of God’s will; it is a partnership. The Divine meets us where we are [making an effort to meet the divine.] When we open our hearts, even a little, God is present.” I like this passage from Heschel, even though I don’t agree that God’s nearness is conditional. But I do believe that Judaism automatically invites me at this season of the year to consider each moment and count each day precious in order to acquire a wise heart. The

invitation of Judaism to develop my character would recognize 5786 as a truly critical time for us to rise in stature and poise. Our people, our nation, and arguably all people across the globe, are counting on Jews and so many other peoples to organize our lives around the practice of our noblest virtues. So let's get busy! Let not a moment pass before we look to see what sludge inside us needs to be drained? What virtues are ready to refill the place where dirt and bacteria and resentment have accrued? Our souls are engines of infinite potential. We can make a lot of love from them and foster hopefulness and abundance. Will we? I pray we do.

Let's maintain our souls and practice hope. Clear filters and replace what needs doing so, and refill our spirits with courage, compassion, and generosity. We can do this. After all, 5786 is all potential. Not a minute has been wasted yet. It holds strength, love, and blessing, if we are willing to see it there, and it gives us an opportunity to build forward momentum and really get somewhere in our lives.

The investor and respected figure Gil Penchina once said: "Momentum begets momentum, and the best way to start is to start." His work is in the financial field and his advice is about entrepreneurship and helping people grow small businesses into something strong, vibrant and enduring. His admonition can give us confidence when it comes to our getting somewhere with teshuvah as well!

For momentum begets momentum. We don't have to transform our souls at once. We just have to start using our tools- our prayer, our acts of forgiveness and demonstration of genuine contrition, our learning how to pay better attention, and willingness to invest in a new filter enabling our breathing air that is good for us again. That first step we take may create the momentum we need. May Shabbat Shuvah be the point we choose to begin.

Amen.

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