

Nashuvah: Erev Rosh Hashanah

Pick up any magazine or self-help book and it will tell you what is wrong with you; what's wrong with your body, the way you eat, the way you work, the way you parent, your sleeping habits; the list goes on. There is an endless number of products that promise perfection -- if you buy them you'll be thinner, richer, happier, more beautiful and more efficient. Our American culture of consumerism is based on telling us what is wrong with ourselves and promising that we can buy a better life. Judaism has a very different message. On Rosh Hashanah we face ourselves as imperfect beings in the deepest sense. We take a hard look at our own inadequacies and limitations, the destructive patterns in our lives. What keeps us from deepening our relationships or progressing towards our goals? How have we hurt the ones around us? How do we sabotage ourselves? What mistakes do we keep making, over and over again? There is no easy remedy for these failings, no product we can buy that will fix us.

Judaism offers another way: the path of Teshuvah. It is a hard and winding path, but it offers us a pathway to true and lasting change. Teshuvah is often translated as "repentance," but it literally means "return." Our tradition does not accept the idea of original sin, or the belief that our negative actions leave a permanent stain on our soul. At the core of teshuvah is a deeply optimistic philosophy – the idea that we can return to who we really are, our authentic selves, the good person who sometimes misses the mark and falls short.

Teshuvah begins when we look within and admit out loud what we need to change in ourselves. We don't just acknowledge wrong behaviors; we look at what

provokes those behaviors and causes us to be less than our best selves. We notice the ways we react to stress, hunger, fatigue; we take note of our own impatience and impulsiveness, pettiness and insecurity; our hair-trigger temper, our intolerance for the failings of others. After this often painful self-scrutiny, we apologize to those whom we have wronged – not through an email or a text, but a personal conversation. We talk with our loved ones, colleagues and friends. We don't offer excuses. We admit what we've done wrong, express remorse, try to make it right. Doing so takes a lot of courage – there's no question about it. But only through this process can we strengthen our relationships. When others offer sincere apologies to us, we accept them and offer forgiveness. And, perhaps hardest of all, we offer kindness and forgiveness to ourselves.

The final step of teshuvah focuses on the future. We vow to behave differently. We pay attention to the things that trigger our worst behaviors. And then, when we are in the same situations, we make a better choice. Instead of losing our temper, we take a deep breath and think before we speak. Instead of coming home stressed and lashing out at our loved ones, we find another outlet. Instead of gossiping, we move the conversation in a positive direction.

This process of admitting out loud what we have done, facing the one we have harmed, and then moving on to do better next time, is the Jewish engine for self-improvement. Without it, we would live an unexamined life, trapped in self-destructive habits that keep us from reaching our highest potential. More important, teshuvah keeps us from punishing ourselves forever; stops us from getting

stuck in self-loathing, thinking about ourselves in only negative ways. Such pervasive negativity can leave us feeling hopeless, mired in despair.

Because teshuvah is part of our lives, we are dynamic, ever-evolving creatures. We are always working on ourselves. Who we are is not defined by any one event. An intrinsic part of teshuvah is the decision to move forward in a positive way, not to beat ourselves up or to dwell in guilt. So the S'fat Emet taught: "Rather than allow ourselves to be burdened by regret for our past misdeeds, we must strive to develop the inherent goodness which lies hidden in our souls, beneath layers of tarnish left by our sins" [Rabbi Joseph Stern (interpreting the Sfatai Emet)].

Of course, it's hard to save up a year's worth of self-scrutiny and do it all on the High Holidays. So our Sages urged us to make time for teshuvah every day. They recommend the practice of "*cheshbon hanefesh al ha-mitah*" – taking a few moments at the end of the day to reflect. We can ask ourselves what went well, what didn't go so well, and what we can do better tomorrow. Then, just as important, we let it go for the night, say the Sh'ma and get a good night's sleep. Rabbi Eliezer taught in Mishna Avot, "Do teshuvah one day before your death." His students asked him, "But does a person know on what day they will die?" "That is exactly the point!" he replied. "Let a person do teshuvah today and every day lest they die tomorrow, and in this way they will live all their days in teshuvah" (Avot 2:10).

Teshuvah is the work of a lifetime. It's the way we build what David Brooks called "the eulogy virtues" – not the achievements we list on our resume, but the fine qualities our loved ones will remember when we are gone. At the heart of this day is a beautiful

promise. Today, tradition says, the world is born anew. Rosh Hashanah celebrates both the creation of the universe, and the creation of human beings, blessed with the potential for continuous evolution, self-improvement and growth. Nothing is static. Nothing is a foregone conclusion. All of us are free to change. Our Sages teach in a Midrash that on Rosh Hashanah, God says to us: “My children, I look upon you as if today I had created a new creature” (Vayikra Rabba 29:1). God believes in us, in our endlessly unfolding potential. So also, let us believe in ourselves.

I want to close with a short story: According to a recent news report, a group of tourists spent hours recently looking for a missing woman near Iceland’s Eldgja canyon, only to find her among the search party. The group was traveling through Iceland on a tour bus and stopped near a volcanic canyon. Soon, there was word of a missing passenger. The woman, who had changed clothes, didn’t recognize the description of herself, and joined the search. But the search was called off at about 3 a.m., when it became clear the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself.

We pledge tonight: *Nashuvah* -- we will return. We dare to venture on the rocky path of teshuvah, the road back to our highest self, the person we are meant to be. *Nashuva* -- we will return to the parts of ourselves that are hard to face and to the conflicts in our lives that stubbornly persist. We won’t be satisfied with ignoring them or simply hoping for the best. *Nashuva* -- this will not be quick or easy, and the solution does not come in a bottle. It’s more like journeying near a volcanic canyon. But we do it together. Tonight we commit to teshuvah, to forming a search party for ourselves,

knowing our shared journey will lead to greater self-knowledge and to true and lasting change. Shana Tovah.