

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon - 2026/5787

“What Teshuvah Feels Like”

There's an old story I've told a few times because it's one of my favorites. A rabbi asked his students, “What is the distance between East (left hand) and West (right hand)?”

One student said, “From one side of the city to the other?” No.

Another student said, “From one side of the country to the other?” No.

A more clever student said, “From one side of the earth to the other?” No.

And a fourth student said, “Around the earth completely?” No.

“The distance between East and West,” said the wise rabbi, “is the steps it takes to turn around. First, you're facing East, then in one turn, you're facing West. So it is, with teshuvah, the act of turning.”

So it is, as we begin the New Year of 5787.

The term “*Rosh Hashanah*” literally means “the head of the year.” It's a celebratory beginning of the year, for sure, when we wish each other *L'shana Tova* - for a good year. But it's also the beginning of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe leading up to Yom Kippur. It's the season of teshuvah, but what is that exactly?

Given my early exposure to Eastern religions and varieties of mysticism and humanism, the traditional metaphors for God never really worked for me, especially images of a King or Judge, so I've struggled over the years, even with the concept of *teshuvah* and what it means to turn and return.

To where are we returning? I don't want to return to the past, nor do I want to return to a traditional theology. So I developed an understanding of teshuvah, that I feel compelled to share with you, because I believe it's important. And the fact that I choose to share it on this important night demonstrates how urgently important it is to me.

I hope you'll feel that after tonight, you will have gained an understanding about teshuvah - in three easy steps.

The first step is to understand that traditional metaphors point us toward something deeply personal. There's nothing superficial about what we're doing here.

The second step is to know that just as you can orient yourself by the coordinates of East and West, we also possess an inner compass.

The thing I love about this second step is that it is God-optional. You can orient yourself according to what philosophers called the Transcendentals - the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, whether you believe in God or not.

The third step is an embodied practice that makes these ideas easy to understand, and makes finding and using your inner compass easy to practice.

OK, so returning to the first step, it's fair to say that teshuvah is connected to traditional modes of prayer and the traditional themes of the holiday; like the image of God as a King being enthroned, or as a Judge in a heavenly court inscribing our names, we pray, in the Book of Life. These are ancient if not archaic images that have endured through the ages. Although they seem to have less and less appeal with each passing generation, we still return to them with open minds and open hearts.

But the point is not to return to the past. These images are intended to point us toward a more humble and prayerful way of being, to examine our deeds and misdeeds and strive to make things right. We are encouraged to learn from our mistakes; to forgive others and ask to be forgiven. This can get very personal, in good times and in challenging times.

When I think of challenging times, I think of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who served as the rabbi of Piaseczno, near Warsaw, and is thus known as the Piaseczner

Rebbe. After the Nazis invaded Poland, he was rounded up with other Jews and sent to the Warsaw Ghetto, where he ran an underground synagogue. This was when the Nazis were rapidly exterminating Jews throughout Europe and shortly before everyone in the Warsaw Ghetto had either been starved, murdered, or sent to gas chambers and labor camps.

The Rebbe himself died in a labor camp, but he hid his writings in metal milk canisters and after the war they were found by a construction worker. From these writings, we learn that even in the midst of the cruelty and suffering that he witnessed and endured, he thought deeply about the situation and how best to respond. I can only imagine his angst, knowing that we are witnessing today things that are just as frightening, and so his words enter my heart with a profound sense of urgency. As an act of resistance, he taught that teshuvah is the act of returning to who we are meant to be - but have not yet become.

And so how do we respond to the cruelty and inhumanity that characterized the Holocaust, and yet still persists? How do we respond to injustice and inequity, which are still so widespread? Humanity has not come as far as we'd like to think it has.

Today was the 25th anniversary of September 11th. The nihilistic hatred that existed in the hearts of those who planned and executed the attacks still exists in the hearts of millions of people to this day. How do we respond to that? Do we have the power to eradicate hatred from their hearts? I honestly don't think so. But this I know: that at the very least, I have the power to change what's in my own heart.

I look at the irreversible damage being inflicted on the earth right now in terms of climate change. Those inflicting the damage have very little reason to change their ways. Even if they did, it would still be hard to reverse the damage that's been done. I look at the injustices in our political system, and blatant corruption and the open and obvious misuse of public power for private gain, and I honestly don't know if that can be reversed. And I look at the conflict in the Middle East and I don't know if peace there will

ever be possible. And in all these cases, I feel the grief, the anguish, and pain, and I feel that the most important power I have is my ability to choose how I am going to respond.

Now, the second step is knowing that just as you can orient ourselves in relation to East and West, you also possess an inner compass – a moral compass – whether you believe in God or not.

So where is it? If it was an app on your phone, you'd want to know how to access it, right?

On the kabbalistic tree of life.... - on one side is *gevurah* (right), contraction, strictness, judgment and severity, and on the other is *chesed* (left), expansion, generosity, kindness and mercy. The Kabbalists warn us of leaning too far to one side or the other.

I learned this also from the practice of mussar. With equanimity, there can be too little or too much, or preferably a more appropriate amount somewhere in between. With patience, there can be too much (left) or too little (right) or a more proper amount in between. The same with every other soul quality.

The goal of mussar is to find the right balance in any given situation, but to lean more to the side (left) of generosity, kindness and mercy whenever possible. This is like a compass. You are in the center of a range of possibilities, and you can either go one way or the other.

Now it's probably obvious that I'm a visually-oriented person, so when I think about our ever-evolving journey, I imagine a giant cosmic spiral on which all of humanity exists. We are either evolving up that cosmic spiral in this direction (signal to the left), or devolving (to the right). We are either moving toward expansion (left) or contraction (right).

To make the idea even clearer and to help your muscle memory absorb it, I want to offer an embodied practice. Let me have you stand up if you can and lift up your hands to either side of your head, then open your hands with your palms facing up.

Now imagine that you are a human scale and feel in your right hand a little more kindness. Now feel in your left hand a little less kindness. You can see that you are at the center of a range of possibilities.

So let's try feeling:

More honesty (right hand) or less honesty (left hand)

More empathy (right hand) or less empathy (left hand).

Every situation presents you with a choice between...

More trustworthiness or less trustworthiness

More respect for others or less respect for others

Now spread out in order to claim a little more space because I'm going to ask you to extend your arms to both sides with your palms down. This is also like a nice flying pose. It's also like a warrior pose in yoga because now I'm going to have you tilt your right hand up about 45 degrees and your left hand (my right) down about 45%.

Using this pose, you can see that more kindness is up there. If you're going up a mountain or a spiral staircase, it takes more effort. And if you practice less kindness, well that's down there and it's easier to go down that path. In other words, it takes more to do the right thing; more effort and more sacrifice, but it ennobles us as we orient ourselves toward the true, the good, and the beautiful.

More humility or less humility, or if you want to call it what it is - arrogance.

More gratitude or less gratitude, whether it manifests as entitlement, resentment, or indifference.

This can be hard, like climbing a mountain, and most of you know I love that metaphor. Teshuvah, turning toward our better selves, can be hard, because it's like exercising a certain set of muscles, but over time you can strengthen your power to choose.

OK, you can sit down. My point is that in every moment, we can consciously choose to direct our actions, our thoughts, our attention, in either one direction or the other. You can think of yourself as climbing a mountain, or going up a spiral staircase, or evolving up that cosmic spiral I showed you earlier.

When you make this a practice, it begins to feel like a continuous pledge, promise and prayer. It's there in any and every situation, like a compass, in good times and bad. It's like a kind of mindfulness that is ongoing, whether you're sitting on a cushion or in a very tense situation.

And so we find ourselves here again, many of us in the same physical place as last year, but hopefully we are wiser. And hopefully we have used our time and energy to make a positive difference in the world. Tomorrow morning, I'll talk about a pledge I made last year and that I plan to fulfill this year.

We may or may not be able to determine where we are on that cosmic spiral, but our tradition teaches that we are all ascending, even though there are times when we descend. The story of the Jewish people is that of a journey that leads us ever upward, and that humanity too is evolving, finding its way up that cosmic spiral. Joanna Macy of blessed memory, the environmental activist and scholar of Buddhism who died in Berkeley last year, called this "the Great Turning."

But winding our way up that spiral, again, is a choice that each one of us has to make.

I am inspired by Albert Einstein who concluded that human survival and flourishing depends on serving a purpose larger than oneself.

When someone asked him if he believed in miracles, he famously answered that there are only two ways to live your life: one is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

Nothing is a miracle (stretch out my right hand, palm up) or everything is a miracle (left hand, palm up). How will you choose to live? In which direction will you turn? This is what teshuvah feels like for me; going up that mountain, slowly but surely; like answering a Divine call that leads me ever upward. Whether it brings me closer to God or to Godliness is just two different ways of describing it. And for me, there is no other way, and I believe, it is so for all of us.

In conclusion, “What is the distance between East and West?” It is the steps it takes to choose which way you’re going to go. So it is, with teshuvah, the act of turning toward our better nature. It is the choice to grow and evolve and ascend – to return to who you are meant to be, but have not yet become.

That is one way to think about teshuvah - that it’s deeply personal, and that it means turning toward the soul traits that elevate us as human beings and help us to return to where we began, having been enriched and transformed along the way.