

Rabbi Steve Segar's Rosh Hashana Sermon 5764

Of the traditional terms that are associated with the Days of Awe, the most well known is the word teshuvah which translates into English as turning or returning. Often though, it is mistranslated as repentance. Many of us, who received a conventional Jewish education, have been taught that teshuvah involves the recognition of mistakes we have made in our lives, attempts to redress the party or parties injured and a resolve not to repeat these mistakes in the future. If we have gone through these steps, it can be said that we have "done teshuvah." Maimonides adds to this list the requirement that not until we are faced with a similar set of circumstances and we choose to act differently can teshuvah truly be claimed as an accomplishment.

While this approach to the spiritual work of the Days of Awe is important and compelling in its own way, I have personally never been completely satisfied with it as an adequate operational expression of the spiritual potential contained within the majestic texts, melodies and ritual drama that make up the experience of these days. Many of the names and mythic images connected with Rosh Hashana in particular, such as the notion that this day commemorates the creation of the universe, cry out for the importance of newness and growth and exploration.

In contrast to these ideas, I find the emphasis in the conventional approach to "teshuvah" to move instead in the direction of stasis and equilibrium. At first, our lives are presumed to be fine. Then we make some mistakes which is a perfectly natural thing for human beings to do. Then when we realize what we have done, we can own up to it and ask for forgiveness and if all goes well, we return to the original state of affairs in which everything was fine.

I readily admit to exaggeration and oversimplification with this summary. Of course it's possible that significant growth can take place inside of people who are struggling to take responsibility for the part they play in whatever problems exist in their lives. Nevertheless, it is still the case that personal growth in this scenario is a byproduct rather than a primary objective of the process. The "returning" involved here is a returning to a state of affairs that has existed previously in our lives, whether with regard to moral sensibility, a sense of connection to the Divine presence, or harmony in our relationships with one another. This is clearly a valuable and valid objective to pursue, but also a limited one.

There is one other relatively common use of this term teshuvah. It is heard in conversations about the phenomenon of Jewish people from relatively non-observant families who for a variety of reasons, decide to pursue a much more traditional religious path usually defined strictly by Orthodox standards. These people are referred to as "*ba'alei teshuvah*" or masters of return. The message implicit in this usage is that they have returned to the true path, to the fold of Orthodoxy. While this usage of can be off-putting for many of us because of its implicit anti-liberal bias, it is nonetheless interesting to note the enlarged scope of impact on one's life implied by this definition of teshuvah, as opposed to the conventional one. Here the return involved refers not only to particular moments with particular people we have hurt, but to an entire world view (that of traditional Orthodoxy) as well as the universe of actions that come along with it. This more encompassing field of meaning for the term teshuvah seems to offer at first glance a greater degree of correspondence with the more dynamic aspects of this holiday period, and thus a potential model for our spiritual work. However, its insistence on defining return in terms of the relatively fixed halachic tradition in the end undermines its usefulness for us in that way.

There is another school of thought in Jewish tradition with regard to defining teshuvah that is less well known the first. Building on Talmudic teachings that impute great power and

the process of teshuvah, these thinkers, most of whom are strongly influenced by mystical tradition, express their understandings of this idea in a broader and much more oriented way than what we have seen so far. For example, we have a statement by Rav Yehoshua Falk, the first chief rabbi of Palestine in the modern period who says the following:

Teshuvah is inspired by the yearning of all existence to be better, more pure, more vigorous and on a higher plane than it is. Within this yearning is a hidden life force for overcoming every factor that limits and weakens existence. The particular teshuvah of the individual and certainly of the group draws its strength from this source of life, which is always active with never ending vigor.

Clearly, there is much more taking place in this description than looking at the ways we are led to live up to the best that is within us. Although such reflection is also by no means a part and parcel of this larger process. Similarly, Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, the son of Hasidism's founder, the Ba'al Shem Tov, has this to say about our subject:

After doing teshuvah, one understands God better and one knows that one's teshuvah was performed in light of lack of understanding: hence, one must begin to do teshuvah again in light of greater understanding. Again one attains higher understanding which leads one into teshuvah once more. Hence, there is no limit to doing teshuvah.

Rebbe Nachman's portrait of teshuvah is perhaps less majestic than that of Rav Yehoshua Falk, who emphasizes this element of dynamism that is lacking in the conventional

at least we see understandings of teshuvah that seem to correlate more closely with the depth and profundity of the Days of Awe imagery. This language evokes on a mythic level a sense of personal transformation that exists in potential and that I believe our tradition asks us at least to reach for during this period of the year. However, though figures like Rav Yehoshua Falk and Rebbe Nachman poetically sketch out images of teshuvah of great depth and power, neither of them provide much in the way of detail as to how we are to proceed. We are left with the problem of what it could possibly mean to operationalize such a concept on the level of an individual human being. In other words, how are we to live out this kind of teshuvah? What is the nature of the return to which we are being invited? What is the ritual and the liturgy and the pathos of this part of our sacred calendar? Let's explore one possible answer to that question that I offer in the creative spirit of our tradition.

A good place to begin looking for such an answer is in another teaching from the Hasidic tradition that is fairly well known. It is transmitted as follows:

A person should always keep a pair of notes, one in each one of his or her pockets, and should take each one out as needed in order to maintain a spiritual balance in the world. On one note should be written the phrase, "I am but dust and ashes." On the other should be the words, "the entire universe was created for my sake alone."

The classic interpretation of this teaching sees it as a recipe for dealing with the extremes of excessive pride and excessive humility respectively. However, it is also possible to see this teaching as a recommendation on the importance of maintaining an ongoing awareness of two fundamental human realities that many of us go out of our way to avoid or ignore most of the time. One is the fact of our own mortality as well as the certainty that we will never know at what point we will encounter our last day on earth. The other is a recognition of how each one of us is utterly unique and irreplaceable in the world as well as its spiritual corollary, that each moment of every day of our lives is filled with miracles, most of which we pay no attention to because we are too busy with

other things.

If we accept this reading of our Hasidic teaching as plausible, we can then apply it to our reflection on the nature of teshuvah and we come up with this insight. What we are being asked to return to is nothing less than the profound and primal awareness of both the tragedy and miraculousness of our very own existence. Why do we require a call to return to this type of perspective on our lives? Because the vast majority of us feel much more comfortable when we can keep thoughts about such things very much on the back burners of our consciousness. It is frightening to face our own finitude with clarity and precision.

Paradoxically, it is also the case that many of us feel terrified of recognizing our own potential power and innate gifts. In either case, as we turn our attention to these verities, the stakes of even our most mundane decisions and activities become significant indeed. All the more reason to allow ourselves to run from activity to activity, to fulfill all of our responsibilities, and in so doing, avoid thinking about these realities, though they in truth create the big picture within which we live our lives at every moment. There is an irony within this struggle to compartmentalize the "down to earth" busy parts of our lives on one hand and the "big questions" part of our lives on the other. For, according to Jewish teaching, it is not only possible but desirable and healthy to integrate these two ways of looking at the world and at our lives. Going grocery shopping, fixing a broken appliance or attempting to help your children resolve an argument while trying to remain aware of how stunningly precious each moment of life is, presents a tremendous challenge.

And yet, it is exactly this challenge that is the essence of the call to teshuvah we receive during these days of awe. We are not expected to live constantly in this place of dual awareness, but we are being given the opportunity and the encouragement to push our respective comfort zones and to increase our capacity to experience our lives with as much fullness as we can stand.

Looking at teshuvah from this point of view in no way sacrifices the other interpretations of the term that we have seen. On the contrary, to the extent that we are able to focus our attention on the deepest lessons of life and death, the other dimensions of teshuvah begin to unfold in an organic way. We gain much greater clarity with regard to the true priorities of our lives, which in turn leads to a potential refinement of how we look at the world and ultimately to seeing with great accuracy the ways in which our behavior has sometimes caused pain to others unnecessarily, and to the desire to work at reconciliation and forgiveness.

Jewish sources at all levels address themselves to cultivating our ability to see life from this perspective. In a Talmudic discussion on teshuvah in tractate Shabbat, Rabbi Eliezer is reported to have argued that everyone should do teshuvah at least one day before they are to die. When his disciples point out that it is impossible to know when that time will be, Rabbi Eliezer responds that this is exactly why we should make time for teshuvah every day. In the prayer *modeh ani*, which is traditionally recited immediately upon awakening in the morning, we find the notion that we should thank God for restoring our soul so that we might have one more day of life. In another daily prayer, which we recited together earlier this morning, called *Elohai Neshamah*, there is explicit language that acknowledges the inevitability of physical death. It also contains imagery that relates waking from sleep to the experience of coming to life after one has died. Similarly, at the end of the Amidah prayer, there is a blessing in which we are led to be thankful for the miracles that are with us daily, at every hour, morning, noon and night. In all these ways and more, our tradition developed practices whose purpose it is to remind us about the importance of living our lives to as great an extent as possible with an awareness of the big picture.

And that is the point of teshuvah. We are not here to learn anything that we don't already know. We are here together to gain the courage we need to be a little more open to the excruciating beauty that each one of us contains. May we all grow in our ability, over the

coming days, weeks and months, to be conscious of the preciousness of our own lives and the lives of others even as we go about our day to day activities in a world that is simultaneously familiar and full of mystery.

Shana Tovah umutukah!

Rabbi Steve