

Rabbi Steve Segar's Rosh Hashanah Message 5768

Humility – The Master Key to Teshuvah

Shanah Tovah and *Good Yontif* to everyone.

I'd like to begin with what may sound like a fairly heretical statement coming from a rabbi at the outset of the ten days of repentance: Which is that it often feels to me as if this period of time in the Jewish year arrives in a flurry of high hopes for change and movement in our lives, but that we discover, when the dust settles, and the *sukkot* have been taken down and put back into storage for another year, that we are not in a significantly different place from where we had been before the High Holy Days arrived.

On one hand, we talk about the process of *teshuvah* or repentance in ways that can be beautiful and inspiring. Consider for example, the following descriptions that appear in our very own High Holy Day prayer book: From the contemporary Talmudic scholar and mystic, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz we learn that, "Teshuvah/repentance is one of the ultimate spiritual realities at the core of Jewish faith. Its significance goes far beyond the narrow meaning of contrition or regret, and it embraces a number of concepts considered to be fundamental to the very existence of the world. Certain sages go as far as to include repentance among the entities created before the world itself."

And from the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, we hear the following: "the efficacy of atonement is nil and its symbolic power of no value, unless our sense of sin leads us to seek nothing less than the reconstruction of our personalities, in accordance with the highest ethical possibilities of human nature; only then can we experience teshuvah, the sense of returning to God."

Now I would not want to deny that there are moments in some people's lives when such powerful language would be an appropriate description of their experience of personal transformation, either as part of the formal process of teshuvah or at some other point in life. However, I imagine that for many of us, most of the time, such elevated imagery concerning the nature of repentance can seem to set the bar quite high, and make it difficult for us to feel a connection on a personal level.

On the other hand, for those of us who's expectations for what we might be able to extract from these Days of Awe run in a more pedestrian and practical direction, we can always turn to the ancient tradition of engaging in the process of *heshbone ha nefesh* or doing an accounting of our soul, which typically takes place throughout the Hebrew month of Elul which immediately precedes Rosh Hashanah, and extends into the first ten days of the new year culminating at Yom Kippur. There is a very clear map laid out in various Jewish legal writings of how to go about this practice.

It involves acknowledging any wrongs done, seeking forgiveness from those we have hurt as a result, and successfully resisting the temptation to repeat the transgression the next time we are confronted with such an opportunity. This time honored practice has certainly proven its validity over the course of the centuries when it has been used with apparent success. Still, speaking personally, I can also acknowledge, that more often than not, as I go through this process of *heshbone ha nefesh*, I find that many of the same items and issues end up on my list year after year. And as a result, I have begun to wonder if there might be something different or additional that I could be doing during this period of time. Something that would more effectively help me to gain access to what I am still convinced is the potential for growth and deepening that these days have to offer.

Part of the answer to this question has come to me over the past couple of years as I have begun to learn more about an ancient Jewish approach to spiritual growth called Mussar. The essence of this approach involves the recognition that each one of us carries embedded within our own souls from the moment we are born, what the contemporary Mussar teacher Alan Morinis calls, a spiritual curriculum. By this he means that each of us comes into the world with the full range of human traits and characteristics, but that we each possess these traits in a unique configuration such that certain characteristics are from the start in balance, while others are not. He argues that many of the challenging experiences we have in our lives grow directly out of the unhelpful ways in which our out-of-balance characteristics tend to express themselves. In his model, we will continue to meet the same types of challenges and difficulties over and over again until we begin to see

exactly how our own trait imbalances are contributing to their recurrence.

This awareness will then lead us to be motivated to bring these out of balance traits into more of an equilibrium with one another and with our identity as a whole and in that way, we will truly begin to make progress in our efforts to move ourselves in the direction of wholeness, goodness and satisfaction.

One dimension that the Mussar perspective adds to other traditional Jewish views of individual development is that there is recognition of the need to focus on changing the internal characteristics that drive our actions and attitudes rather than focusing primarily on external behavioral changes.

This perspective provides an explanation for how someone who has made successive attempts, over many high holy day seasons, to change something about their lives could still end up feeling stuck in a spiritual rut. For example, let's say that one of my recurring intentions when I go through this teshuvah process each year is to stay in closer touch with out of town family and friends who I fear sometimes wonder if I have fallen off the edge of the world. The Mussar approach would have me reflect on where the soul trait imbalance might be that is preventing me from keeping this commitment.

It would not take a huge amount of insight for me to recognize, or for my family to point out, that the trait that emphasizes creating order and organization is not so prominent in my psyche and thus, making time for an activity or a task that is not urgently demanding my attention does not come so easily.

A mussar teacher might say that I would need to spend some focused energy on cultivating that trait internally before I would even begin to think about changing my behavior around communicating with my loved ones.

What has been most intriguing to me about the mussar approach is its assertion that there is one fundamental trait that absolutely requires attention in order to begin even thinking about working on any of the other areas of our lives, and the trait that is identified as having this prominent role in our psychic architecture, interestingly enough, is humility.

As author Alan Morinis explains: "The Mussar teachers stress that humility is the primary soul-trait to work on because it entails an honest and unvarnished assessment of who we are. Without this accurate self-awareness, nothing else in our inner life will come into focus in its true measure. Without humility, either we will be so puffed up with arrogance that we won't even see what really needs some work or we will be so deflated and lacking in self esteem that we will despair of making the changes that are lit up so glaringly in our self-critical minds."

Now I'm guessing that many of us may associate the word and the characteristic of Humility with individuals or situations that do not have such a positive resonance for us. People often link humility to the word humiliation and also with feelings of great lowliness and worthlessness. Or our minds may be drawn to the thought that humility is so often contrived or feigned that its apparent presence is a sure signal that we should go running in the opposite direction.

This perspective is well captured in the old Jewish joke about the Rabbi, the Cantor and the caretaker of a synagogue in which the lowly caretaker hears the rabbi and cantor offering prayers to God before the ark in which they confess their own unworthiness for their respective positions in the community. The caretaker is so moved by hearing these prayers that he decides to offer a similar prayer on his own behalf at which point the rabbi turns to the cantor and remarks, "look who thinks he's nothing."

However, these negative conceptions of humility are actually misconceptions, for when we explore traditional interpretations of this trait, we see that they point in a very different and much healthier direction. In the words of psychologist and student of Kabbalah, Estelle Frankel, "with humility, we gain a sense of perspective, so that we neither overestimate nor underestimate our own importance. It frees us up to use all our gifts and talents to the best of our ability by enabling us to accept our limitations and vulnerabilities as well as our strengths."

And according to Alan Morinis, we must understand humility as a characteristic that sits on the balance point of a spectrum that has arrogance at one end and self-debasement at the other. Both of the extremes on this continuum, seeing ourselves as nothing or as everything, are forms of narcissism and distort the truth of our identities. True humility on the other hand inherently includes space for self and other.

Ironically and paradoxically, both self-abnegation and self-importance contain the appearance of an orientation towards those outside oneself. For instance, we see that people who inhabit these states habitually are constantly referencing someone else as a measure of their own subjective sense of self-worth either positively or negatively. However, it is in the state of humility, where one's self-worth is determined without reference to an outside other, that we find the possibility of truly being present to another person's experience.

And in a parallel way, when we are able to ground ourselves in a humility driven perspective, we are much less likely to fall into harsh judgment of other people. This is due to our dual awareness that each of us possesses talents and potential that we are trying to express and each of us is surely dealing with our own limitations, wounds and challenges that the vicissitudes of life and our spiritual curriculum have for better or for worse forced us to confront.

If the benefits of deepening our connection to the trait of humility are significant for us individuals, the affect is multiplied geometrically when it is applied to an entire community. We have spent a lot of time over the past several years exploring the meaning of the term sacred community and explicitly stating our collective aspiration to raise Kol HaLev to that level. It seems to me that this trait of humility is absolutely essential to our goal of creating a sacred community together. The more this characteristic is expressed within our communal processes, the greater will be all our ability to instinctively respond with compassion as often as we respond with judgment when a fellow KHL member's behavior rubs us the wrong way. The greater will be our ability to appreciate and enjoy the range of strengths each one of us brings to the table rather than worrying about whether we are good enough in comparison.

The stronger will be our desire and the more effective will be our encouragement if we notice another member who is not as clear as she or he could be about what his or her particular talents are that could be contributed.

In view of this, I don't think it's an accident that we have chosen as our educational theme for this coming year Leadership and Wisdom, which along with its subtitle, We are all learners and we are all wise, conveys a sense of our vision of this community as one in which each member of any age and any disposition is seen as possessing inherent value. And it also underscores the reality that no person is ever a finished product and that each one of us still has a lot to learn. For me there is no doubt that we will collectively grow more humble, in the best sense of that term, to the extent that we are truly able to enter into this new theme over the course of the coming year.

As we together proceed down this road that will help us all to move in the direction of the community that we aspire to become, I think it behooves us to select as our first piece of wisdom to explore, the teaching attributed to one of the early leaders of the Hassidic revolution, Reb Simcha Bunam. Of him, it is said, that he always kept two notes in his pants pockets. On one was written the words "I am but dust and ashes." On the other was written the words, "for my sake was the universe created." With the help of these notes, he was able to keep himself balanced and grounded in the paradoxical truth of who he was, which is a truth that is no less applicable to each one of us sitting in this room today. May we all, in the year ahead, grow in our ability to keep this truth about ourselves and each other present in our hearts and souls as we proceed along the often difficult and mysterious, but also deeply rewarding path that is at the center of our human becoming.

Amen and Shanah Tovah!

Rabbi Steve