

Rosh Hashanah Talk – 5770  
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Just about a year ago, our community gathered in this very room for our first High Holy Day observance in our new home here at the Lillian and Betty Ratner School. At that time, as things were shifting externally for us, I spoke about the opportunity for interior change presented by the process of moving from one physical location to another. We learned together, that while outer change does not guarantee inner change, it can create otherwise unavailable pathways forward if we are courageous and discerning enough to seize the moment.

But the fact is that most of us do not experience significant external change processes most of the time, and so we grapple with what is clearly an even more challenging task as we encounter the perennial theme of this sacred season; how to generate change from within.

There is no shortage of direction from our tradition when it comes to how to go about the process of change or teshuvah. As with most approaches that have been developed throughout human history, it begins with identifying where our problems lie and then going about trying to fix them. We are told to search our hearts and our deeds, to do an accounting of our souls, so that we may identify the ways in which we have fallen short during the past year. And then, having identified those failures, to approach those whom we may have hurt along the way and ask for their forgiveness. Our change process is considered complete when we are faced with the same situation that originally caused us to stray off the path, but find the strength to make a different choice.

The bias of our tradition seems to be that people have a tendency to avoid this kind of personal work toward change unless they are really pushed to do it. In one famous passage from the laws of repentance, the great medieval scholar Moses Maimonides uses very strong language meant to grab the attention of his fellow community members and motivate them to take this process seriously. He says the following:

"Awake, O you sleepers, awake from your sleep! O you slumberers, awake from your slumber! Search your deeds and turn in *teshuvah*. Remember your Creator, O you who forget the truth in the vanities of time and go astray all the year after vanity and folly that neither profit nor save. Look to your souls and improve your ways and actions. Let every one of you abandon your evil ways and your wicked thoughts, which are not good."

This message may sound a little too close to fire and brimstone for us, but in fact, the spirit of Maimonides' message is not that far removed from the essence of some of the central prayers found in every High Holy Day prayer book. These texts are familiar to anyone who has attended more than a single High Holy Day service, and among them are several long lists of sins that are each repeated a number of times over the course of the holiday period.

In the Ashamu prayer, we make confession for, among other things, causing hurt to others, perverting justice and covering up the truth. And in the even longer list from the Al Chet prayer, we find numerous other transgressions including, deceiving friends, engaging in violence and taking bribes. Of course, the tradition has never assumed that all of us have committed each of these acts, but the understanding has always been that collectively all of these categories apply in one way or another.

Over the past couple of hundred years, as much of the Jewish community has moved in a more liberal direction, there have been many adaptations of these prayers with updated categories of negative behaviors, but the basic focus on where we have fallen short has remained.

For example, in the high holy day supplement from Tikkun magazine, we are called to account for sins such as dulling our outrage at the continuation of poverty and oppression in the world, for not being vigilant stewards of the planet, and for not recognizing the beauty and grandeur of the universe that surrounds us.

It is indisputable that there are many within the wider Jewish community, and certainly among us here at Kol HaLev, who consistently find the experience of moving through the high holy day period to be a powerful and meaningful one. However, to my knowledge there has never been any research done on how effective the holidays are at facilitating the kind of lasting change they are meant to inspire, even among those who seriously engage with them. In fact, we really don't know in any kind of objective way if this approach to change actually works. What if it turns out that it is based on a premise which is severely limited, or worse, fundamentally flawed?

These kinds of questions have arisen for me as I have been making my way through the master's program in organizational development at Case Western Reserve University. If someone asked me, in the spirit of Rabbi Hillel, to sum up on one foot what this program is all about, I would have to say, it's about change. Every class and every assignment in one way or another invites inquiry into how individuals and organizations can make sustained desirable change happen in their lives.

And, in contrast to our high holy day situation, in the academic environment, there is a substantial amount of research, that does shed light on what elements within a person or a group are most likely to set a successful change process in motion. And it is interesting to note, especially in the relatively self-critical context of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, that nearly all of the most promising models of effective change stress the critical role that positive perspectives and attitudes play in bringing that change about.

Most of the cutting edge thinking in organizational change grows out of a perspective that encourages identifying and building on strengths rather than focusing on problem solving. This research is not claiming that progress is impossible within a problem solving paradigm, but it **is** claiming that the difference between what can happen within a problem solving framework and what can happen in a strength based framework is like the difference between arithmetic and geometric growth. In other words, we are dealing with two completely different universes of potential.

In the problem solving model, people tend to assume that the positive dimensions of life don't require any focused attention since they are able to take care of themselves, but that perspective is misleading in at least two ways. The first is that if we don't explore and gain an understanding of what supports the positive dimension, we may inadvertently undercut some of those supports in our bid to solve the obvious problems. Secondly, if we ignore the positive, we are likely missing a tremendous opportunity to tap into and unleash vast amounts of energy that can be harnessed to move an individual or an organization far beyond what was previously thought possible.

There are a number of different areas of research that have produced findings which reinforce the impact that positive orientations have on individuals and groups. In the arena of sports, it has been shown that athletes who review tapes of their successful moments improve their game much more quickly than those who focus on moments of failure.

Psychologist Barbara Frederickson has shown that positive emotions confer a number of benefits on the people who experience them including increased behavioral flexibility, increased creativity, enhanced immune system response and enhanced capacity for learning.

And in the arena of marriage, family therapist John Gottman has studied successful and unsuccessful marriages over the past several decades and has managed to develop a mathematical model that measures

the likelihood that a given marriage will last and deepen over the long term. Using this model, he and his research team have established a 90% success rate of predicting which marriages will flourish and which ones will disintegrate.

And one of his most well grounded findings is that happily married couples maintain a five to one ratio of positive to negative interactions over the course of their married life. These findings correlate with other investigations, such as those focused on high performing organizational teams, which show a similar pattern of a disproportionate number of positive experiences in order to balance the impact of just one negative experience. It is important to realize that in all of these examples, it is not that negative or critical dynamics should not be present at all, but rather that they must be present in the proper proportion compared with the positive ones.

Being exposed to all of this research on the power of the positive throughout the course of my program, I have approached the high holyday period differently this year than ever before. I remain extremely appreciative of what a tremendous gift it is to us that we have an extended period of time set aside every year for individual and communal introspection and renewal. However, I am now acutely aware of the contrast between what is known about change in today's world and what we are exposed to during this, our change oriented season, in terms of the primarily negative voice in many of the prayers we recite, and in the predominantly self-critical nature of many of the practices that have been handed down through tradition.

I have found myself wondering what it might look like to shift the center of gravity of this time period from being focused mainly on our failings to a more balanced perspective that encouraged at least as much, if not more, focus on our moments of success and on our experiences of acting in accord with our highest selves. What if we were to use this time of year to deepen our relationship to our best selves along with exploring where we have gone astray? What might this look like in practice?

In addition to examining our deeds from the past year to excavate and reflect on powerful experiences of being at our best, we might want to use this time between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur to experiment with incorporating practices into our lives that are designed to strengthen the positive dynamic both within our own hearts and minds and within the various configurations of relationship that we each inhabit.

For example, we might use this time either to initiate or strengthen a process of connecting with the part of ourselves that is most passionate about and engaged with life. This is a voice that can easily get lost beneath the stresses and responsibilities of daily living. And it can best be reclaimed by taking some time alone and/or with a loved one to articulate what it is that you care most about at this stage in your life and to imagine how you might ideally structure your life such that the aspects that you care most about get the level of attention they deserve.

In the context of what I've learned about this, it is important to try and capture these understandings in writing rather than simply talking about them. Stereotypically, cultivating a personal vision for the future is something we tend to associate most strongly with the earlier stages of life; with childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, but in fact, the process of refining where we truly want to go and how we imagine getting there only becomes more important as we mature and develop.

Another way of tapping into the positivity revolution would be to make a commitment during this period of time to become more conscious of the patterns in the way we conduct our inner dialogue, or in other words, how we talk to ourselves about what we remember from the past, what we experience in the present and what we anticipate about the future.

One of the core findings in the positive psychology literature is that the quality of this inner dialogue is highly predictive of the health and success of a person across many dimensions of life experience. So, raising our awareness regarding the nature of our own inner dialogue would represent a solid first step in the process of moving that dialogue in a more positive direction.

Another more playful possibility to consider is conducting a simple experiment that we tried recently in our family as I was learning about the importance of positive to negative ratios that define healthy and productive relationships. After explaining this idea to our kids, we set out three bowls on our kitchen table. One was full of dried beans and the other two were empty, but they did have labels attached to each of them, one being labeled positive and the other negative. The rules we decided on for the duration of the afternoon were that any member of the family could choose at any point to place a bean in either bowl if they felt that a corresponding interaction had taken place between any members of the family. I don't think anyone will be surprised to hear that the next couple of hours were among the nicest we have had as a family.

Focusing our collective awareness on the quality of our respective interactions had the effect of increasing our sensitivity to one another and of deepening our understanding of the power we wield over one another through our use of language.

I realize that what I'm suggesting here today involves making a fundamental shift in how we practice and experience an extremely important and ancient piece of our tradition. Yet, I think there several good reasons to give it serious consideration. One is historical precedent. There have been many times in our people's history that some aspect of the tradition has been fundamentally reframed based on new intellectual currents or emerging societal circumstances.

Another is commitment to our Reconstructionist legacy which encourages an open and vigorous exchange of ideas between Jewish tradition and the broader culture in which we are embedded. Thirdly, and I think most importantly, is that Jewish tradition, taken as a whole would support this particular shift within the practice of the high holy days. Our culture, on balance, is not one that is negatively charged, medieval polemics notwithstanding. On the contrary, there is tremendous importance attached to appreciation, awe, wonder and gratitude. And there is healthy dose of joy as well.

With our scientific understanding of how change occurs now increasing by leaps and bounds, perhaps the time has arrived for us to import more of this positive energy into the religious language and practice of these most sacred days on our calendar.

There is a verse in this morning's Torah portion that we didn't read, but which may be the most positive in the entire Torah: Va yar Elohim et kol asher asa, ve hiney tov m'ode. And God saw all that had been made and behold, it was very good. May we all take inspiration from that assertion and embrace the importance of recognizing and cultivating our own goodness as a primary catalyst of change. And may the potential contained within these holy days to play an important role in that process become ever clearer and more accessible to us as we move forward into the future.