

Change?!

reflections on Teshuvah

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While walking around a rather hot and humid Tel Aviv this past summer, I found myself exchanging 'light bulb jokes' with our British born tour guide, Nicola. You know the jokes ... "how many ____ does it take to change a light bulb?" I asked Nicola, "How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?" She shrugged her shoulders and I supplied the answer that I am sure most of you know, "Don't bother, I'll just sit in the dark."

Next it was Nicola's turn, and she asked me a very Israeli version of the joke: "How many ultra-Orthodox rabbis does it take to change a light bulb?" I shrugged my shoulders. To which she responded, "Change!?"

The power of the joke, of course, is the kernel of truth residing within. We all know about the ultra-Orthodox resistance to change. We bemoan it. We criticize it. But, let's be honest, the power of the joke is the kernel of truth residing not only within those that are the butt of the joke, but residing within us as well. We may be much more modern, think of ourselves as 21st century while 'they' continue to reside somewhere in centuries gone by, but aren't we are just as orthodox in our own ways and just as resistant to change? And yet, as much as we fight it, we all know that one of the only things we can count on as consistent and unchanging in this life is that things will change.

Our very wise ancestors understood the absolute inevitability and necessity of change as well as our difficulty with it. And so, they built it in as a core concept and consideration of the High Holy Days. It is right there in the name of this day: Rosh Hashanah. We usually translate this as 'the beginning of the year.' But the word "shanah" itself is rooted in the word 'change,' and so today could just as easily be translated as the "Beginning of Change".

It is from this vantage point, at the changing of time, that we stop to first, look back and consider our journey the changes that have occurred along the way, those we planned and those unexpected, those at which we succeeded and those at which we failed; where we became disconnected from family, friends, community, from God and from our self. It is inevitable, of course as we travel through the year. It is part and parcel of our most imperfect human condition. And so, the High Holy Days provides us with the opportunity to reconnect by giving us time for remembering that which is at the source of our being; literally *re-membering*, like a more successful version of Humpty Dumpty *putting ourselves back together again*, making ourselves whole and holy once again. Then, we are ready to turn around in order to consider the changes we would like to make. Of course, inevitably there will be those for which we planned and those as well that we tried to delay. There are those for which we hope and those that we, often sadly, accept as inevitable. Come what may, plan as we might, set up all the avoidance mechanisms we

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can, when we join back here next year, the one thing of which we can be assured is that a great deal will have changed.

So the big question of the day, really *the only question of the day* is “Will we do something about it?” Will we shrug our shoulders and take a seat at the side of the road simply watching our life go by? Or, will we *do what we can about those things that we can do something about?* This is the act of *teshuvah*: proactively doing what we can about those things that we can do something about. And I can tell you how to do that in 3 easy steps.

1. **Recognition:** *Teshuvah* begins with recognition that we have “missed the mark.” For that is what the word “cheyt” actually means. *Al cheyt shechatanu*, we read in our prayer book confessions, “for the sins we have sinned” But *cheyt* really means “to have missed the mark”, not hit the bulls eye. *Al cheyt shechatanu* “for all the ways we have messed up.” I know it is less eloquent, but it also does not carry all the ‘societal baggage’ that makes ‘sin’ such a difficult word for us to take on. We can all recognize where we have ‘missed the mark’. Unfortunately though, this is often where it ends: quiet self-acknowledgement in the recesses of our hearts. So that ultimately all we do is add these recognitions to the pile of stuff we are already dragging around with us. After a while, the pile has become so heavy that we find ourselves walking backward as we attempt to drag the pile along.
2. And so the process of *teshuvah* requires (2) a **verbal declaration** of our decision to change. This is the communal confession *al cheyt shechateynu*, and it is the more personal and humbling act of verbally acknowledging to our friends and loved ones that we have erred and intend to change. There is something quite powerful in saying the words out loud. No longer in the recesses of our hearts, we have admitted our mistakes for all to hear. You may know this as a first critical part of the 12 step process: “Hi, my name is Barry and I have made some mistakes for which I need to ask your forgiveness.”

This acknowledgement has a better chance of moving us to action because now everyone has heard. So, we might take measures to move forward in a better way. But, if this is where we stop the process of change is not complete. We might move more cautiously and with more sensitivity, but ultimately we may still find ourselves facing in the wrong direction and pulling that huge load. And despite what we would like to believe and what the movie suggests, you *cannot* go “back to the future!”

An important emotional ingredient is still missing.

3. And so the process of *teshuvah* require a third most important step which enables us to actually *change direction*: we must allow ourselves to **feel the pain of remorse** surrounding that which we desire to change. Maimonides teaches that it is allowing ourselves to feel and express regret for the pain we have

brought upon others and upon ourselves that is the necessary final motivating factor, allowing us to make the needed changes in our lives. Of course, it is this step at which we most often and most naturally fail. Our pain avoidance mechanisms and natural defenses kick in to try and protect us.

But, to move forward, to truly affect *teshuvah*, this step is essential. Expressing regret, feeling remorse *is* painful. But, as uncomfortable and painful as this may be, it is also a necessary step. If there is no remorse or regret, there is no real, sincere, desire to change. With expressions of regret and remorse we can finally drop the rope and stop dragging all that stuff along with us that demands the exertion of so much psychic and emotional energy.

1.) Recognition of where we have missed the mark, 2.) verbal acknowledgement of those errors and 3.) allowing ourselves feelings of remorse, are the steps of *teshuvah*. See, three easy steps to truly change the course of our lives. Okay, so they're not so easy. But they *are* essential if we have any hope of growing and changing.

Should we choose to take up this difficult journey of change with which we are challenged at this season, the images and teachings of our tradition are there to offer us support and encouragement. First and foremost, we are **re-minded** that we were each created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image in order that we might **re-member** our essential connection to God.

Somewhere mixed together in the midst of those four unpronounceable letters, YHVH, are the verbs 'was,' 'is,' and 'will be' as a message to us that the God in whose image we are created is a continually evolving, continually emerging, continually changing *verb*. This is the meaning of the very cryptic response God gives to Moses when he asks God "What name shall I use when I introduce you to the Israelites?" To which God replies, '*eheyeh asher eheyeh*.' "I will be what I will be." I will be what you need me to be. I will be what the changing circumstances of your life demand me to be: a ferocious warrior or a loving friend, a protective shield or a light in the darkness, a comforting support or a stern teacher. So *I was* for your ancestors, so *I am* for you and so *I will be* for your children. And *so must you be* ...never static, continually *evolving*, continually changing, growing and becoming beings – not human beings at all, but rather, *human becomings*. Like the God in whose image we are created, when we look deeply into ourselves and ask the questions we are each challenged to ask at this time of year, "Who have I been?, Who am I? and "Who will I be?" We are beckoned towards *teshuvah* with the response God gave to Moses, '*eheyeh asher eheyeh*?' "I will become what I must become" I will be open and prepared to embrace the possibilities. This is *teshuvah*.

Of course, *Teshuvah*, is more than an personal concern. As individuals in relationship, change for us [as individuals] ultimately means change for *us* [as community]. As a community, we face these very same questions "Who have we been? Who are we? Who will we be?" We have responded, 'we will be what we need to be.' 'We will become what we need to become.' That response has been captured in what has become the watchword of our community over these past three years, "Embrace the Possibilities."

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Rather than remain stagnant, this community has chosen to live, to grow and change and evolve. This growth involves those same steps of *teshuvah*: recognition of our missteps, their public acknowledgement and allowing ourselves the pain of loss and the expression of remorse that accompanies letting go and moving on. We have certainly had our moments.

But, out of them has emerged a vision for an amazing future for this community. We have turned to face the future, blessing *what was*, celebrating *what is* and embracing the possibility of *what will be*. Yes, Temple Ahavat Shalom has changed! How could it not? Haven't you?

So, on this the day of the beginning of change, I invite you to embrace the possibilities provided by the process of *teshuvah*. Recognize your missteps, vocalize your acknowledgement and allow yourself to feel remorse. And then, embrace the call to renewal.

The world today is filled with possibility and promise. A year lies before us waiting to be revealed. We can't choose all the colors ... there will be the brilliant blues of unending promise and possibility and there will be, without a doubt, the darker hues of un-chosen pain and tragedy. We can not choose it all, but we can choose how to respond – and along the way, as members of this community, we can have the comfort and assurance that we share this journey together, that we are here to support each other, to encourage each other, to love and to comfort each other. And we can know as well that God journeys with us, a Divine presence within each of us that calls out at each moment and with each step, *ehayah asher ehayah* I will be what you need me to be.

Change?! Absolutely. Embrace the Possibilities.

Keep Change In Your Pockets

Danny Maseng (c) 2000

So listen, so listen - keep change in your pockets at all times!

Keep change for the beggar, the bus, for the train

Keep a spot, keep a room, keep a window wide open

Keep a cool change of clothes for the moment of moments!

Keep the fire in your soul

Keep remembering

Keep reminding yourself - Keep a stone for the journey

Keep the face you've been longing for etched in your heart

Keep the gleam in your eyes

Keep the pillar of fire to guide you by night

Keep the pillar of vapor to cool you by day

Keep on looking for signs, for a path, for an opening

Keep your hopes, keep collecting your dreams

Keep the palms of your hands outstretched like a beggar

Keep the sound of the whispered small daughter of voice

Keep the glow of her face

Keep on following towards
Keep the passion unbroken
Keep the yearning unending
Keep it deep in your bones
Bear the pain, be a fool
Keep believing
Keep on marching ahead to that place where you learn what simplicity
is
What commitment is for
Why the eyes were created
Why the soul is transparent
Why there's no greater gift
In this wondrous world
Than to suffer a heart filled with love for no reason

Why there's nothing as lonely
Why there's no greater journey
There is no greater joy
Keep some change in your pocket
Some change for that moment
Just enough for that moment of moments
When we're all in the moment
When we're finally all in the place at the time in the grace
Face to face with the one
And you wouldn't be wanting to find yourself
Stuck, by the side of the road with no change
With your pockets embarrassed and empty
And your heart so hollow so close to the end
Having traveled so far
So listen -
Keep change in your pockets at all times!