



Teshuvah: God's Gift To Humanity – Sept. 15, 2023, 5784

by Ira Korinow

Shanah Tovah! Truth be told, I had reservations about delivering today's Drash. In fact, when Steve Brown approached me in late Spring at a Shabbat morning Kiddush about giving a Drash on the *Yamim Nora'im*, the High Holy Days, I told him, "Let me think about it." He asked me again a couple of weeks later and I told him again, "I still have to think about it." After a few more weeks, he asked me a third time, saying that I must have a file of Ddashot that I gave during my 42 years on the pulpit, and so when he approached me again and asked if I had thought about it, I then realized that I was beginning to handle this situation like a rabbi being approached by a non-Jew about becoming Jewish and so I asked him for a little more time to think about it.

Then he came back to me a week or so later (for a 4th time) and he asked me if I could do the Drash on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. He even said that I could use AI (as he had done a few weeks ago). And like the rabbi being approached about becoming Jewish, and not saying "yes," I thought to myself, "Wow! He's really serious about this!" And so I agreed that I would.

Again, truth be told, during those 42 years as a congregational rabbi, I really never gave Drashot on the High Holy Days; rather I gave sermons. I differentiate between the two because my congregants always expected from me (and from my predecessors in all 4 congregations that I served in both the Reform and Conservative movements), to relate a particular theme of the High Holy Days with contemporary issues that we as a nation, that we as B'nai Adam, as human beings were facing or an issue that our congregation or city was facing. In other words, my messages have always had a political slant.

But, unlike when we post the word "Political" on our messages on the Community List Serve of the Minyan - giving warning to the reader the nature of what they are about to read and thus the opportunity to either continue to read it or to trash it, when I stood to give a Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur sermon, everyone in my community knew that they were going to hear a message that either they will agree with or disagree with, even vehemently disagree with. But I knew that that kind of Drash with a political message was off-limits for this, our *kehillah kedoshah*, our sacred community. So while I have always related the issues I spoke about to the themes and texts of these High Holy Days, I was not about to "lift" a past sermon and deliver it here.

So where do I begin? This morning I want to remind ourselves of a couple of the themes of these sacred Holy Days so that these sacred days can be more meaningful and more relevant to our lives. I don't plan to go into detail but rather to remind us of our task during these days. And for that, we really have to think about the fact that these Holy Days do not begin with Rosh Hashanah and conclude with Yom Kippur.

For me, the High Holy Days always began on Tisha B'Av. Not because it was a day to get used to fasting for over 25 hours as I would do about 9 weeks later on Yom Kippur. But rather, because the Shabbat following Tisha B'Av (Shabbat Nachamu) stated very clearly in the Chumash that the Haftarah was the first of the Shiv'ata D'nechemta, the seven Haftarot of consolation immediately prior to Rosh Hashanah. And the next week, for Parashat Ekev, it clearly stated it was the 2nd of the Shiv'ata D'nechemta,. And so on...

I was reminded how many more weeks until I would have a sanctuary full of 700 congregants expecting a meaningful service and a first class sermon worthy of a Pulitzer Prize and whose delivery was worthy of a Tony Award. It was a seven week countdown to Yom Ha-Din - literally Judgment Day for me.

Actually, the countdown often began even before Tisha B'Av - for during the 14 years that my 3 sons, my late wife and I spent four weeks each summer at Camp Yavneh where my wife, Gail z"l, was a Hebrew teacher and I often gave the Drash, usually telling a story, at the Egalitarian Minyan (approximately 3/4 of the camp population) on the Shabbatot that we would spend there. During those weeks at Camp Yavneh at the end of Musaf, we would always sing the Kaddish Shalem to the tune which was composed to be used at Neilah on Yom Kippur - we all know it (chant the first line)... so for many years I was reminded of the approach of the High Holy Days even before Tisha B'Av.

But seriously, the High Holy Days demand considerable time of preparation for every Jew. While Pesach demands much physical preparation, the entire month of Elul is a month of spiritual preparation as we are reminded of the approaching High Holy Days each morning by the sounding of the shofar after Shacharit. The Kol Shofar, the sound of the shofar is literally a *kol*, a voice calling out to us to prepare for the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, which in rabbinical circles, some rabbis prefer to call them, the "Awful Days!"

The first theme I want to mention, I will do so very briefly. Our liturgy for Rosh Hashanah declares, "Hayom harat olam" - Today is the birthday of the world. The rabbis tell us that creation began on Rosh Hashanah. Our tradition teaches that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, and our Torah opens with God's memories of the world's birth.

Like all loving parents, God, too, was filled with a sense of joy and wonder. God, too, ecstatically pondered the great potential for good that was embodied in the newborn planet. At the end of almost each creative day, in satisfaction and hope, "God saw that it was good." But on the last day, as God capped the creative endeavor with the creation of us, God's children, God, considering the totality of creation, filled with parental love and with great hope for the future, declared it "very good."

Yet the work of creation continues to this day, and it is up to us, God's children, as God's partners in creation, to choose whether or not we will live up to our God-given potential for good. The choice is ours. We can choose to make our world a wondrous place to behold and live in or we can allow it to fall into chaos and suffering.

Our High Holy Days invite us to engage in a process we call "Cheshbon Nefesh" literally "taking an account of our lives," in which we take a deep and serious review of how we met and/or failed to meet our highest potential during the past year, and to decide how we will build on our strengths and learn from our failures as we enter the year ahead.

During the time beginning in Elul, we are called upon to perform Cheshbon Nefesh, looking back at what we've done and what we need to change. I want to share a story I read a few of months ago written by a rabbi in a sermon he gave. I used this story in a sermon I gave in Portsmouth, New Hampshire where I had been the interim rabbi for two years. I was there to help out on a Shabbat when the new settled rabbi was out of town. Now, truth be told, I was warned by Sally not to tell it because she thought some in the Minyan may feel it to be offensive or not PC. If you feel that way, I'll be happy to give you the name of the rabbi and how to reach him, and you can complain directly to him! This rabbi wrote it in a sermon marking Israel's 75th anniversary entitled, "Israel at 75: Happy Anniversary?" It goes like this (remember, this is the *other* rabbi speaking!):

My father (also a rabbi) used to love to tell the story of his being present at a 50th wedding anniversary celebration and he went over to the groom to give him a *mazal tov*, and found the groom despondent and sitting in a corner all by himself. My father asked him what was bothering him on such a special occasion in his life. The groom replied, "Rabbi, do you remember? You officiated at my wedding 50 years ago." "Yes," my father said, "I remember." "And do you remember," He continued "that I came to you shortly after the wedding and I told you that I had made a terrible mistake and I want to kill her. Do you remember what you said?" And my father replied, "Yes, I told you not to do it. If you kill her you would spend the next 50 years in prison." "So, what's the problem?" asked my father. The groom responded, "Just think ... If I hadn't listened to you, I'd be a free man today!"

The days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, we are commanded to look back and take account of our lives. And here I want to note that the root of the word *shannah* the word for "year," has two opposite meanings. Its Hebrew root, *shin, nun, heh* can mean "to change" or be different (*shoneh*) or as in *mah nishtanah* (why is this night different); but it can also mean "repeated" as in the adjective "*nishneh*."

Another name for the Book of D'varim, the Book of Deuteronomy is "Mishneh Torah," the second Torah or the repetition of the Law. You may also recognize this term as the title of one of Moses Maimonides writings - with great rabbinic modesty, he named what he wrote "Mishneh Torah" - the repetition of the Torah - or the Second Torah - as if it, too, was written at Sinai!

The name of this holy day itself reminds us that we have to change and repeat - change what we've done wrong but also to repeat those deeds which were good.

And from Cheshbon Nefesh, *teshuvah*, the 2nd theme naturally follows. We often translate *teshuvah* as “a returning”, or “a response.” Of course, in every day Hebrew, *teshuvah* means an answer, usually to a question. Cheshbon Nefesh is the first step in *teshuvah* - looking back and taking account of what we’ve done. This is something that is not always easy to do.

In just 10 days on Yom Kippur we will listen to the words of Sefer Yonah, the Book of Jonah, which our tradition often describes as the model for *teshuvah*. But there are issues there in the story... Was Jonah’s *teshuvah* real? And we need to ask, “Is our own *teshuvah* real?” A very difficult question to ask for it requires us to reflect honestly on our own vulnerabilities, our own failings, as well as our own growth and our own healing, our own moral accountabilities. Are we ready to admit our own failings or continue to live a dishonest life, much like the groom in the story did or be prepared to change our ways, even as difficult as it may be?

Teshuvah involves a few steps that need to be taken. For that I turn to Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah - Hilchot Teshuvah - the Laws of Teshuvah in which he states there are three classic elements of *teshuvah*:

The first is תְּחִיבָה, regret, the second is וְדוּי, confession and the third is עֲזִיבַת הַחַטָּא, abandonment of sin. First, acknowledging that our lives during the past year were not as we had hoped, i.e., regret. Second, admitting what part we played that made what we now regret possible, i.e. confession. And finally, taking steps in the future to abandon the possible repeat of those actions which we now admit to and regret having done them.

I cannot identify what you may have said, what you may have done that needs to be addressed. Only you know what needs to be changed in your own life. I can only help define the steps that need to be taken.

Teshuvah is a pretty remarkable concept, a God-given gift, but we Jews may not have a monopoly on it. I want to share something from my own life that made me appreciate even more the meaning of *Teshuvah*.

About two decades ago in late summer, I was driving home from my *shul*, to my house in Haverhill where now one of my sons, his wife and two children (two of our 11 grandchildren) now live. When approaching my street from the south on Main Street - Route 125, you pass a No U-Turn sign and shortly after, the New Life Christian Assembly Church. The Assemblies of God is a very conservative evangelical Christian movement which has over 13,000 churches in the U.S. with over 3 million members.

The church in Haverhill has a message board on its lawn which often has some very interesting messages, some often offensive ones, especially messages about the LGBTQ community. On it this particular week was written the following message superimposed over a U-Turn road symbol. Remember, after passing a sign that says no U-Turn, here is the church’s message: “Need To Turn Around? - God Allows U-Turns.”

I have a tendency to take note of these brief messages that pastors place upon their church marquees. But few such marquees have grabbed my attention as this U-Turn message. It was late August or early September and I couldn't stop thinking about it. To be honest, I wanted to stop, steal it, and mount it right outside the entrance to our synagogue for the High Holy Days. Just imagine, as everyone walks up to the entranceway they would see a giant No U-Turn sign with the words: "Need To Turn Around? God Allows U-Turns." In one sign lies the underlying principal of the High Holy Days and God's gift to humanity: TESHUVAH!

Remember that the root of the word teshuvah, SHUV, means to turn, as in to turn around, or to turn back. The New Christian Assemblies of God reminds us that Teshuvah, when done, permits us a second chance to do what is right. The basic premise that a second chance is possible, that there is a possibility of turning one's life around, is an important message for these High Holy Days.

Even the rabbis wrote about second chances. In a midrash on the Book of Jonah, in their own creative thinking, the rabbis wrote that when the boat on which Jonah tried to escape from his duties given to him by God, there was a tempestuous storm, and Jonah admitted to the sailors on the boat that the storm was his fault for trying to run away from God's commanding him on a certain mission, but in the midrash, the sailors did not throw him in the water right away, but rather they lowered him below the water and the storm stopped, and then raised him out of the water and the storm returned; they lowered him again and the raging storm stopped; and raised him again and the storm began raging again. The rabbis understand this as even Jonah was worthy of a second chance and so when the sailors did finally toss Jonah into the sea, God made it possible for the big fish to heave Jonah out of its belly onto dry land. It was Jonah's second chance.

Teshuvah gives us the chance to turn our lives around, to respond to the regret we feel, to admit our wrongdoing and to change our lives in the year to come. And, by the way, the rabbis struggled with the idea that we confess our wrongdoings, seek forgiveness and atonement only on these Holy Days. One can imagine the Rabbis nearly 2000 years ago sitting around a table, studying and discussing the process of *teshuvah* being done on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and raising the question, do we only have to perform *teshuvah* on these days?

The discussion was ongoing, long and loud when one rabbi - Rabbi Eliezer - slammed his hand down on the table which quieted everyone and Rabbi Eliezer said (as recorded in the Mishnah, Mishnah Avot "Gentlemen, the truth is that we have to perform Teshuvah only one day in our lives," and the rabbis there all gasped in surprise and astonishment - after all, how could the much respected Rabbi Eliezer say such a thing? And Rabbi Eliezer continued to speak - "Only on one day do we need to do Teshuvah and ask for forgiveness, and that one day," he said, "was the day before we die."

Friends, we don't know what the future will bring and of course, we do need to live each and every day as though it's our last day on this Earth.

This is a season of renewal but we can't deny the fact that the New Year brings with it challenges which we face. I pray that we succeed in our reflections, our prayers and our *teshuvah* and I

leave you with these questions as we navigate these sacred days. We know that *teshuvah* is what we must engage in these High Holy Days, but how do we measure our success? Do we measure our success in terms of our own growth, healing and moral accountability? Is our own *teshuvah* real and how do we measure our own authentic commitment? Do we measure that by whether we succeed six months out from the High Holy Days? Do we measure it by whether we put a plan in place? How do we think about our own *teshuvah* and how do we think about helping to facilitate that for others in our lives, too?

No one has ever said that it's easy being Jewish. And these questions that we must face confirms that statement.

As we begin the year 5784 today, may it bring to each of us and our loved ones, a year filled with good health, a year of sweetness and prosperity a year of *shalom*, a year of wholeness and well-being, a year of peace.

And remember, when you're driving on the streets of Newton, the state highways of Massachusetts or the interstates of our country, you might not be permitted to make a U-Turn, but remember - "Need to turn around? God allows U-Turns!"

Shanah Tovah!