

How Do We Sustain Our Changes?

A rabbi once taught her students: We are told that for those who have not done *Teshuvah*, we are as far away from the Holy One of Blessing as East is from West. And so she asked her students: How far away is East from West?

The American student answered: 3,000 miles

The Russian student answered: 5,000 miles

The geography student answered: 22,000 miles—the circumference of the earth.

The Rabbi considered the responses and found each one of them lacking. She said: The distance between East and West is exactly one step. You are facing East—but then you can take one step and turn around—and now you will be facing West.

In the same way, the Rabbi said to her students, *Teshuvah* does not begin with a change of one's entire being. Instead, *Teshuvah*—the commitment to real and lasting change—begins with a change in direction.

Each year, we come to these Days of Awe prepared to take that one step, ready to move from East to West. We affirm that we human beings are capable of making significant changes in our lives, capable of becoming better people. Each year, the premise of these days is that all of us can, indeed, can make lasting change. Each year, we get to imagine who we really want to be in the world. But let's be clear. Making meaningful, enduring changes in our lives is very, very hard. If we glimpse the possibility of change, but do not put in the effort and the work

to sustain it, then this entire period on the Jewish calendar is little more than a farce—little more than theatre—in which we beat our breasts, confess our sins, vow to change, and then hurry home for break the fast so that we can go back to the comfort of our lives as we have always known them.

How do we resist this pull? How do we stay in the light of *Teshuvah* when we wake up tomorrow morning? These questions take on added meaning when we consider this particular moment in time. We come to this Yom Kippur merely days after the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and still in the midst of a pandemic we never imagined would last this long. Both of these experiences challenged us to change the way we view our lives; both offered moments of reflection and consideration. In this way, we might think of 9/11 and the pandemic as two different opportunities for extended *Teshuvah*. Let's start by looking back to that day that left an indelible mark on all of our memories. September 11, 2001. Remember that beautiful, clear, crisp fall morning? Remember how quickly our collective sense of invulnerability as a nation was shattered? Remember the horror that unfolded? The anguished cries of families fearfully awaiting news of loved ones. The pictures plastered on the walls of construction sites with photos and descriptions of the missing. The pain we felt as we learned about the heroism of the first responders who never made it back to their families when they went into the Towers to try to save lives?

The sorrow of that time seemed to transform the world and to galvanize our nation. In the weeks following the attack, the way we lived in the world changed dramatically. We were less worried about our **things** and more worried about **each other**. We weren't nearly as frivolous. Contributions to *tzedakah*

skyrocketed. Americans from all across the country came together; not just those who were directly impacted by the attacks. Our elected officials modeled bipartisanship and reminded us that we were one United States of America.

Our priorities seemed to change as well. People who had put off weddings decided to get married; couples who had put off having children decided to try to have a baby—in fact, there was a mini baby boom about ten months after the attacks. Americans began to **see** the world differently and to **act** differently. It appeared that Americans were prepared to derive meaning from our mourning. In sorrow we resolved to change. And we did change. . .for a while.

We know that we human beings—at times of great stress—or great exaltation—can stretch ourselves to reach farther and higher than we might have thought possible. But with the passage of time, we slowly move back into the well-worn grooves of habits. And if we are being truly honest with ourselves, with the exception of those who lost loved ones on that day, the weeks, months and years since September 11th have largely seen us go back to old ways of thinking and doing. It is as if, as a nation, we did *Teshuvah* and then went home, broke the fast, and succumbed to the pull of life as we once knew it.

Think about it: in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 many of us were reassessing our lives. The horrific images of that morning showed us the importance of living to the fullest because we remembered how uncertain life really is. We committed to living differently, with more intension, more kindness, more integrity. But let's be honest. 20 years later are we really that different? Are your relationships different? Are you giving more *tzedakah*, or volunteering more? Do you really wake up each morning with a greater appreciation of what it

means to be alive because 20 years ago—on one beautiful autumn day—3,000 people were killed for no good reason?

If the commitments to change we imagined have faded over these past 20 years since 9/11, what about during these last 18 months of the pandemic? How confident are we that the new priorities that we have imagined will be long-lasting ones? Over the course of these past many months of the pandemic, many of you have told me that you have started to appreciate things in your lives that you had previously taken for granted. Some of you told me about how grateful you are to have re-connected with friends that you had not been in touch with for years; some of you mentioned to me a new artistic endeavor that you decided to try—a musical instrument that you had picked up again after years of having it sit in a closet. Some of you took up baking, some of you read poetry for the first time. Mostly, I heard about the relationships that you were no longer taking for granted; the ways in which you managed to see family members—even if outdoors in the winter; the ways in which you were able to stay in touch with friends—sometimes sharing dinner at your homes separately over Zoom. So many things that we used to take for granted suddenly seemed precious. But here, too, the question remains: how long will that appreciation last? How long will those changes in our behavior really last once we go back to some semblance of normalcy?

If we are honest, this is the haunting question that we come back to every year on Yom Kippur—but it is a question that holds particular meaning this year. How do we make **lasting change**? How do we avoid making this day devoted to *Teshuvah*—after these 18 months of new commitments—little more than empty rhetoric?

Today, I want to propose to you that at the heart of any lasting change—at the core of any real *Teshuvah*—is the willingness to work on oneself in the most ordinary and mundane of circumstances. We are often taught: “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” As I approach the start of my sixth decade of life, more and more I have come to realize is that it is **precisely** how we deal with the small stuff that reveals who we are. The moments of great triumph or agony are, for most of us, relatively few. Instead, we know that our lives are defined by the mundane moments that occur in between. How we behave in the everyday, in the small moments that shape our lives. That is how we make sure that our *Teshuvah* is not just a performance, but the beginning of real and enduring change.

Our Jewish tradition has a conceptual framework that teaches us the value of the small stuff and underscores the constant interplay between the bigger picture of our best and most expansive selves and the small day to day actions that sustain them. This is the symbiotic relationship between *kevah* and *kavanah*, which serve as a framework for understanding the Jewish practice of prayer. The Hebrew word *kevah* comes from the root *kevuah*, meaning stable, regular, set. Jewish prayer is a set table, one we traditionally come to three times a day, at appointed times, to recite prescribed words of obligatory prayers. *Kavanah* can be connected to the word *kivun*, or direction. *Kavanah* is the **reason we pray**, it is the everchanging wondrous place we hope our prayer will lead us to. In our tradition, *kevah* is necessary for *kavanah*. Most of us, when left to our own devices, won’t get to *kavanah* that often—won’t get to those moments of wonder. From our tradition’s perspective, only the regular, everyday commitment of repetition and practice will bring us there regularly. In reflecting on this tension, Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel wrote, “I am not always in a mood to pray. I do not always have the vision and the strength to say a word in the presence of God. But when I am weak, it is the law that gives me strength; when my vision is dim, it is duty that gives me insight.”

Many of us know this to be true when it comes to exercise. It is one thing to make the resolution that we want to be healthier, that we want our bodies to feel more alive. That is *kavanah*. But without the *kevah* of a daily exercise regime, that good intention will lead absolutely nowhere.

The same applies if we really want to get to the essence of *Teshuvah*. We don't just wake up one morning and find that we have become the people we have always wanted to be. We have to work at it, every day, even when we don't want to, even when it is hard. It is only through our willingness to do the small things in the day-to-day actions of our lives that we can evolve to become our best and highest selves. This is the way in which we move from **episodic** change—to glimpses of something better—to **sustained** change—to a new version of who we are in the world. This is the kind of *Teshuvah* that we seek in the coming year.

So how do we translate our intentions into concrete action steps that will help sustain our *Teshuvah*—and integrate them into the fabric of our lives? I want to offer you four aspirational questions—questions that represents our highest intentions—our *Kavanah*. And after each one of those questions, I want to offer concrete suggestions about ways you might make those intentions real—the *Kevah*—which might help translate these intentions into your everyday lives. These questions are based on a list of questions developed by my colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein. I hope these questions and the

implementation strategies that follow can provide us with a roadmap for translating our ideals into our actions—and thereby make our *Teshuvah* sustained and meaningful in the coming year.

Question 1: Who is with me in life? Who knows me and cares for me; who do I know intimately, and who do I care for deeply? And how do I demonstrate with my actions the importance of these commitments?

Find the people in your lives who really matter and show up for them. We all need an Other—a soul mate, a family member, a friend—a person who offers us the opportunity to love and with whom we can experience love. Someone who helps us to become the best version of ourselves. None of us comes into this world being able to see our own faces unaided. It is also true that we cannot see our own soul without the help of those who love us deeply. Only in relationship, only in loving care with a partner or a true friend will we come to know who we really are—and then be able to bring forth the best parts of ourselves into the world. Know who your people are and be willing to be there for them—and invest in those relationships.

Question 2: What are the causes and purposes that inspire me? What vision of the world do I believe in, what have I worked for, and what will I struggle for? What commitments have I sacrificed for? What ideals define me?

During this time of pandemic, we learned something important—we learned how important it is to widen our circles of concern. And in widening those circles, we found that our souls could soar. Before this pandemic, we might have prized our independence. But for many of us, the pandemic reminded us that life's greatest dignity comes from recognizing that we are **needed**; that something is asked of us. We remembered that a life of meaning

manifests itself in a readiness to respond, to care, to give, to engage, to help, and ultimately, to heal. Find ways to widen your circles of concern in the coming year if you want to make sustained change in your life.

Question 3: Where is my creativity? What can I contribute to the world that is precious, beautiful, and mine? Each of us has a story to tell. Each of our eyes sees the world in a way that is unique. Can we find a way to share what we know, to share what we have discovered? Tell your story. Make music. Make art. Touch the world in some special way. You were created in the image of the Divine; there is creativity in you, and there is great joy in creativity. Find a practice that you can commit to in the coming year that will nurture your sense of creativity.

Question 4: Am I growing? Am I becoming wiser, deeper, more compassionate? Am I becoming a better person than I used to be?

The truest path to growth comes through our ability to have empathy for the suffering of another. For when we care, and when we act on our caring, we discover the power of our own selves to heal. Paradoxically, it is when we are willing to act selflessly that the self discovers its essence.

These are the questions that can allow us to live out our deepest intimations of what truly matters as this New Year begins to unfold. *Teshuvah* is not the business of grand gestures and sweeping changes made in the heat of the moment; rather, *Teshuvah* means infusing the “small stuff” of everyday life with meaning and with purpose.

Through our willingness to love deeply; through our recognition that we can commit to actions and ideals that make a difference in the world so that we expand our circles of concern; through our ability to be creative and to

bring forth new forms of expression; and through our willingness to grow—to grow in wisdom and in kindness and in humility—we can infuse the everyday actions of our lives with meaning and significance.

Of course, it is far easier to return to old habits. In this New Year, with a pandemic that we pray will soon be mostly behind us, let us begin the work of sweating the small stuff that reflect our deepest aspirations. For that is the only way to make lasting change; to make good on our promises of *Teshuvah*; and ultimately, the only way to heal ourselves and to transform the world for the good.

May we have the strength, the courage and the wisdom to begin the hard work.

Kein yi'he ratzon—So may it be—G'mar Hatima Tova