

## Changing Direction – Shabbat Shuvah 5778

In the days of Communism's fierce grip on the Soviet Union, there lived a Chassidic Jew named Reb Mendel Futerfas. Reb Mendel repeatedly put his life at risk with his efforts to promote Jewish education behind the Iron Curtain and for some 14 years was incarcerated in prisons and labor camps for the "crime" of teaching Torah. While in the Siberian Gulag, he spent most of his time studying and praying, but he also interacted with other prisoners – one of whom was a tightrope walker who had previously performed with the circus.

After Stalin died, the prison authorities relaxed their rules a bit, and guards informed their charges that they would be allowed to stage a makeshift festival on May Day. There was no doubt that the famous tightrope walker's act would be the highlight of the celebration. And, of course, Reb Mendel would be sitting front row in the audience!

Everyone watched with bated breath as the gentleman climbed the tall pole to the suspended cord above. His first steps were timid and tentative, but within seconds it all came back to him. With hands twirling about, he virtually glided across the rope to its end, made a fast turn, and reversed direction back to the other side. The crowd went wild!

When he was done, the performer slid down off the pole, took a bow, and went running straight to Reb Mendel.

"So? What did you think?" he said. The rabbi was much impressed! "Such skill," he enthused, "and without even a net for safety! But tell me - what is the hardest part of your act? Is it that initial step as

you try to find footing? Is it the moment in which you feel like you're starting to lose balance? Is it the physical exertion? The psychological stress?"

"It actually is none of those things," replied the acrobat, "The hardest part of the act is when I change direction. During that split second, I lose sight of the first pole, and the other pole has not yet come into view; there is real danger there. But if I don't allow myself to get confused and distracted during that transition, my eyes eventually find the place and my balance will be there. I just have to have a little faith."

"Indeed," said Reb Mendel, nodding sagely. "I know exactly what you mean."

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Reb Mendel may never have set foot on a tight-rope wire but, as man of deep self-awareness and introspection, he immediately understood that the hardest part of most acts, as of most lives, is turning ourselves around. So many things keep propelling us forward even on the most ill-advised or unsatisfactory of paths – inertia, fear of the unknown, depleted reserves of energy and other resources, irrational attachment to the present, comfort in what is predictable and familiar. It's hard to chart a new course - particularly as we get older and more set in our ways, as our choices impact not only ourselves but others as well, as the opportunity costs for our decisions rise. The danger that the tightrope-walker describes, in losing sight of one goal before another has yet fully come into view, is real. Often we intuit that our current course is unsustainable before we fully realize where it is that we need to go instead and just how we are to get there.

And yet, if we can maintain just a bit of attention and perseverance, hope and faith, during a difficult transition, often not only balance but also a greater sense of happiness and well-being will be restored. We are generally well aware of the need to change direction, even as we may ignore or reject or fight against the impulse; once we have pushed past our vast bastions of resistance, we often find ourselves in a far better and healthier place. And so on this morning of Shabbat Shuvah, literally the “Shabbat of Return” which falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, perhaps we can give ourselves permission to lose sight of the year 5777 just ended even if the pole of 5778 hasn’t quite yet come into focus. Perhaps we can give ourselves permission to change direction.

Shabbat Shuvah is named for the opening words of the special *haftarah* for the day from the Book of Hosea, “*Shuva Yisrael ad Adonai Elohecha – Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God*” (Hosea 14:2). The context of the prophet’s words is that of repentance; the people have rebelled and sinned against God and Hosea urges them to turn back from transgression, to turn back towards the Divine. Indeed, other references appropriate to the High Holiday season present themselves in the *haftarah*, from the blasts of the shofar mentioned in Chapter 2:1 to the idea of prayer as replacing sacrifice as a vehicle for expiation in Chapter 14:3. Most importantly, the reading concludes with the idea that no matter how poorly we have behaved and how far we have strayed, God will always forgive us with compassion as Hosea proclaims: “God will take us back in love, God will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Hosea 7:19). God is waiting for us with open arms, inviting us to put our misdeeds aside and return. All we have to do is to meet God on the path.

I do not believe it at all coincidental that the Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, shares the same root as the Hebrew verb to return, *lashuv*. Both to come back physically -to return -and to come back spiritually -to repent -require changing direction, leaving certain things behind in order to embrace new

ones instead, losing sight of pole A even before having reached pole B. And yet, we notice, “returning” and “changing direction” are not exactly the same thing for changing direction simply implies going in a way different from the way one has been progressing currently while “returning” connotes going back to a place where one has been once before. Many of you will know that I tend to think of *teshuvah* as returning to our best selves, to the parts of us that are the most patient and kind, gracious and giving. *Teshuvah* is not about full-scale transformation or a complete reinvention of personality. It’s rather about recognizing the ways in which we’ve come away from who we most wish to be in the world and reorienting ourselves back in the right direction.

This year, with the holiday this past Thursday and Friday proceeding immediately into Shabbat, this morning also kicks off the *aseret y’mei teshuvah* – the 10 days of Repentance which fall between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Many of us are familiar with the traditional teaching about this period on our calendar – that atonement in prayer can only make up for those sins committed between ourselves and God and not for sins committed between ourselves and another person which rather require directly apology and attempts to make amends. *Teshuvah* does not work by fiat – unlike in the Catholic tradition it’s not something that our priest (or our rabbi) can do for us; it doesn’t just happen by sitting in services or reciting prayers or even vowing to do better. *Teshuvah* requires action – approaching another and asking for forgiveness, trying to repair what has been broken. And, in the famous words of the great rabbi Maimonides, we only know that *teshuvah* has been successfully achieved when we find ourselves in the same situation where we previously erred and this time choose a better course instead.

It is not at all easy to change direction. And it is often uncomfortable to approach those whom we have wronged and to express regret. So I offer this morning, as a source of potential comfort and strength, one of my most favorite *midrashim* (rabbinic stories) about a king who had a son he loved very much.

When the boy was still young he ran away from home, traveling further and further away from his father's kingdom and having many new experiences and adventures. After a while, however, he began to feel homesick. His friends said to him, "Go back, for surely your father misses you a great deal." But the son replied, "I have gone too far and do not have the strength to travel the whole distance by myself." So he sent his father a note and the reply came back immediately. He wrote, "Come back as far as your strength will take you, and I will meet you there."

So too, I believe, it is with our *teshuvah*. God may not be able to affect repentance for us by fiat, but Jewish tradition is an excellent resource for meeting us on our path of return and gently urging us just a little bit further. All the trappings of the High Holiday season – the stirring melodies, the powerful words of our liturgy, the gathering with family and community, the blasts of the Shofar, the pure white of the Torah mantles, the sweet tastes of apples and honey – all of these are meant to orient us towards grand themes that might inspire return: hope, human connection, the passing of time, memory, justice, compassion, healing. The season inspires us to consider the direction we have been traveling and to evaluate whether it is truly the right path. The season also infuses us with an extra measure of strength to turn around if that, indeed, is required in certain areas as it is for most of us. If we don't allow ourselves to get confused and distracted during the transition, our eyes will eventually find the place and our balance will be there. We start inching our way from Pole A to Pole B.

And so this morning, Shabbat Shuva 5778, the very first Sabbath of the new year just begun, I wish all of us courage and strength as we begin the difficult task of turning around. Indeed, changing direction is the most challenging part of most lives as it is of most acts, requiring great reserves of fortitude, resolve, and faith. It requires believing that we will eventually find our way, even if the path currently seems uncertain.

Unlike our friend the circus performer, however, we walk not by ourselves but with community there beside us. We walk with the safety-net of Jewish tradition there to catch us if we fall. Most importantly, we walk with God who is prepared to meet us on the way. Wherever we lose strength, God will help to bring us back home.

Wishing us all *Shana Tova* and *G'mar Hatimah Tova* – a Happy New Year and to be sealed for good in the Book of Life!

Shabbat Shalom!