This week, as we have been planning and rehearsing for Yom Kippur services, I have been
tinking a lot about my Yom Kippur experiences growing up at my childhood synagogue. I remember the
seriousness of those services. People stood somberly, there was a thick serious mood in the air that
could not be ignored...and I loved it. I loved the choir, I loved the white robes the Rabbi and the Cantor
wore, and I loved how many people were gathering together to pray.

But then I think about what teshuva, what repentance meant to me at that time in my life. I
think first about the pounding my chest. Naming sins, and more sins, and calling out where I have gone
astray.

When I was a kid, I remember reading the names of sins that I had no idea what they meant.
What is slander, what does it mean to has scorned, what does it mean to act presumptuously? I am only
ten years old! I remember feeling guilty, and I remember feeling sad. I had a sense that God knew
everything that I had done, and somehow, I was not living up to my potential.

It was a scary kind of teshuva. I was not sure exactly what would happen to me if I didn’t repent
in the correct way, And I also was not certain what would happen if I did preform it correctly?
Would my year be better? Would I stay safe? Would the people I love stay safe?

Honestly, when I think about those days, I remember longing for the kind of Catholic
confessional that I saw in movies. My understanding was you would tell a priest exactly what you had
done, and you would be given instructions for how to make it go away. In Judaism, I was not given this
forgiveness. I was just given a really big Machzor in Hebrew, (or at TBZ 5 different colorful and
spirally-bound machzorim), With no guarantee that anything would change.

This is the kind of theological angst a ten-year-old who will one day go to Rabbinical school
experiences.

Teshuva is a complicated business. Teshuva begins as a daily practice. When we pray the Amidah
during the week, we say a blessing:

‘Pardon us, our parent, for we have sinned; forgive us, our Ruler, for we have transgressed.”

Our liturgy includes this daily asking for pardon. We acknowledge each day where we have
fallen short, where we have missed the mark, and we ask God to give us a pass. We know that God is a
God of truth who punishes the wicked and supports the righteous, and yet in that time when we are the
ones look wicked, we are asking God to be the God of rachamim, of Compassion. We are asking God to
not see these actions as the ones that define us.
For so many, of us Teshuva is fundamentally about changing the worst parts of ourselves. Rabmam, in his Halachic code the Mishnah Torah, imagines a process for engaging with this kind of teshuva:

“Among the ways of teshuvah are for the penitent to constantly shout before God with crying and pleading; to do tzedakah according to one’s ability; to distance themselves very far from the thing in which they sinned; to change their name, meaning to say “I am someone else and I am not the same person who did those things; to change all of their actions for good and onto the straight path; and to go into exile because exile atones for sins since it forces them to bow and to be humble and of low spirit. (Hilchot Teshuva 2:4)

Rambam imagines that a person must remove themselves far away from their transgressions to engage in full teshuva. His text suggests that the person themself has become no longer acceptable. They need to dramatically change themselves, or perhaps they need to run away from that person; Abandoning that self to adopt a new self.

This is the kind of teshuva so many of us imagine. We imagine banging our chest with our fist as if we are either punishing ourselves for being the people that we are, or that we are literary trying to bang the sin out of us. I see the value in wanting to have a clean slate. I am a baseball fan, and it feels like opening day of baseball season. Every team has zero wins and zero losses, and any team has a chance to win the World Series on opening day. And There is also something powerful about the final Shofar blow on Yom Kippur in this model. It feels as if we are getting that fresh opportunity. Anything is possible from this moment on.

But there is also a misleading quality to this kind of teshuva. Think about all of the times you may have tried to commit to a New Year’s Resolution. You start off the year ready to be the new person who wakes up earlier, or goes to the gym every day. But inevitably, after a few months in you revert back to your own habits. This is such a common experience. It is kind of interesting that in Judaism, we call this big change we are committing to make, the teshuva or the ‘returning’. It sounds more reasonable that when we adopt our old habits, we are actually returning to who we really are.

In Rambam’s model, we are returning to some idealized version of ourselves; Maybe a person we wish we were. We are so desperately trying to return, because somewhere down the road someone told us we weren’t good enough. Because a television commercial said we didn’t look the right way. Because somewhere in our religion it was suggested to us that we were not enough.

But of course, we are enough.

You are enough. We are made In God’s image, Betzelem Elokim. We are both deeply flawed, and incredibly holy and Godly people that live on this earth. You are the perfect ‘you’ in this moment, and it is the role of our community to celebrate that.

So what role might Teshuva play, If we are really trying to return to the people we really know we are. Is there room to change anything about ourselves?
The Hasidic teacher Rebbe Nachman of Breslov offers a definition of teshuva. A different kind of teshuva which acknowledges both our uniqueness and our ability to change. He suggests that Teshuva is about returning to the good points within ourselves. He writes in his work Likutei Moharan:

“It is necessary to judge every person as meritorious. Even if someone is entirely wicked, it is necessary to search and find in them some bit of good, that in this bit they are not wicked. If you find a bit of good in them, and you judge them as meritorious, you can raise them in truth to the side of merit, and you can return them in teshuva, in repentance.

And importantly, one must also search out and seek to find in themselves some amount of good in order to revive themselves And to attain joy. By seeking in themselves that there is still a bit of good, they truly leave the scale of guilt for the scale of merit, so that they are able to turn back in repentance (Likutei Moharan 281-282).”

Rabbi Nachman sees the work of teshuva fundamentally differently. He knows that the role of this work is not to try to eliminate our bad habits or our evil inclinations, rather we are returning to the good that makes us who we are. We elevate those best qualities of the other and of ourselves. And through this process of getting in touch with the best of ourselves, we actually move the scales of judgement. We are inscribed in the book of life

This might just seem like a “fancy PR” type of teshuva! Can we really change just by only focusing on particular parts of ourselves? Is this not avoidant? I don’t think so. The stories we tell about who we are and how we function in the world as critical. Of course, all of us will fall short this year, but we also will do wonderful acts of Chesed. We will be present for our families. We will work hard in our jobs. We will contribute to the Temple. We will discover new skills, new passions, and new parts of ourselves we never knew existed.

It is easy for us to focus on what is wrong with ourselves. That is the voice that is broadcast in our in our subconscious 24/7, To take time this week to focus on our good points, might actually be the most important thing we can do if we wish to get a clear and accurate depiction of who we really are.

Think back to Rambam’s model of teshuva, the teshuva of changing our names and sending the bad parts of ourselves into exile. That kind of Teshuva is just as avoidant. It avoids the goodness that exists in all of us, the real love we have for ourselves and others, and our deep potential to be our best selves.

The journey of Teshuva according to Rebbe Nachman is a journey of rediscovery. It reminds me of the meditation book by Jon Kabat Zin. It is called, “Wherever you go there you are.” The process of Teshuva may be a journey, and where we end is not exactly where we started. But wherever we end up is where we were all along. We are just seeing ourselves as meritorious.

Today is Shabbat Shuvah. The Shabbat during the Ten Days of Teshuva between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This year it falls right in the middle of our ten days. It is our time to check-in on how our teshuva work has been going, or maybe to remind us to get started if we haven’t thought much about it since Rosh Hashana. On this Shabbat we take a breath. We remember that this work of self-discovery is a yearlong process. It is a marathon not a sprint. It is a continual process of turning, and turning, and
turning. And if Teshuva is about changing, It is a change of perspective. We are not moving; we are seeing ourselves differently.

   Let us continue to turn and turn. Let us find the bravery to see the goodness and each other, and the sheer courage to see the goodness in ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.