

Shabbat Shuva 5780

October 5, 2019/6 Tishrei 5780

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Shuva...the Shabbat that is in between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The word Shuva is a variant of the word teshuva that we use throughout this season...repentance or return.

In our Yom Kippur prayer book, there is a reflection from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. "The impact of erev Yom Kippur was more powerful in my life than that of Yom Kippur itself. What really changed my life, and shaped my character, were the few hours before Yom Kippur. I am not going to give you a description. I can only say that they were moments in my life when I felt somehow more than human. These were difficult hours. It was a great challenge for us to discover whether it was still possible for us in our civilization to go through such great experiences. It was great fear and trembling, great *pachad*, great awareness that you are now to be confronted. There was no fear of punishment, not even a fear of death, but the expectation of standing in the presence of God. This was the decisive moment. Get ready, purify yourself. Terribly lacking in explicitness, but tremendously powerful. And behind it a full sense of one's own unworthiness and a sense of contrition."

As is so often the case, Heschel's eloquence...and the knowledge of what he was able to overcome and accomplish in his life...presents us with important food for thought. Here we are, past Rosh HaShana and preparing for Yom Kippur. Do we have an "expectation of standing in the presence of God?" Will we feel a closeness during these holy days? Will we carry that closeness into the days of the year?

Another way to phrase Heschel's teaching, about the power of erev Yom Kippur, is that the process of preparation for Yom Kippur is critically important...the work of teshuva is about the soul work and the relationship work that we do in an intense fashion during the 10 days, perhaps even more than what we will do during the hours of Yom Kippur itself.

The classic teaching about teshuva asks us to consider how our actions impact other people: so we are not to simply sit in the pews and speak to God. Rather, we are to engage with one another in open, honest conversation. We should use this season as a chance to turn—for that is the most literal translation of shuva—towards one another, to own our words and our deeds, and to set those relationships on the strongest footing for the coming year.

Considering this, I see something that occurs each year in this modern, technological era of social media. Many people: thoughtful, sensitive, well-meaning people, will post a blanket apology on Facebook...“If I have wronged anyone this year, please forgive me.” It’s a sweet sentiment, and perhaps a way to reach a wide range of people in our lives, but I don’t believe it fully honors the historic nature of teshuva. Simply put, teshuva is meant to happen in personal and intimate ways...face to face, through direct conversation. It is meant to be concrete and specific.

I still remember the call I received during the High Holy Days many years ago, from a senior leader, someone I had had incidental contact with several months prior. In short, he called me, out of the blue, to say that he was reflecting on his year and found himself thinking about the conversations he had had with me...and he wanted to apologize to me for how he spoke with me. It would have been very simple for him to let our interactions simply recede into the past, but through his soul work and relationship work, he reached out in a direct and personal way to reset our relationship. It was unexpected, powerful, and has resulted in a close and meaningful relationship that has deepened over many years.

I share the example to encourage each of us focus on the opportunity of this season. To paraphrase from Heschel, this is a season when we should realize that we are being confronted, by God and by all those people in our lives. When we embrace this opportunity, when we take this chance to speak with open hearts and open minds, we set ourselves on a path that can renew and strengthen relationships and create a positive trajectory for the year. During these few days, we can have a profound impact on all the days of the year to come, and make it a year of goodness and peace.