

Teshuvah: Better Late than Never
Kol Nidre 2002 (5763)
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

I'd like to tell you a story about *teshuvah*.

The story was told to me by a woman named Ilse Meyer, an old friend of my in-laws. Last winter, I was invited to deliver a series of talks in Louisville, KY, as part of a Shabbaton in memory of my late father-in-law, Rabbi Simcha Kling. While I was there, Ilse hosted my mother-in-law and me for dinner one evening. Ilse is a cheerful person, rarely without a smile on her face. While there, I happened to notice an interesting object in her dining room. It was of pewter and appeared to be some sort of an antique oil lamp, hanging from the ceiling. I asked her what it was and where she got it from.

And this is what she said:

Ilse grew up in a traditional Jewish home in the small town of Volksmarsen, in central Germany, with her parents and a brother and a sister. Her father was a tailor. They were one of only about forty Jewish families in town. The lamp that I'd noticed had been in their home growing up. It was a Shabbes lamp. Originally, it was an oil lamp that her grandmother would light every Friday night; her mother had adapted it so that it could hold candles. When lit, it would illuminate the dining room for the entire evening. It had been in the family since at least 1780.

In the 1930's, because of the increasingly restrictive and dangerous situation, little by little, the family began to disperse. Her uncle emigrated to the United States in 1936; her brother, in 1938.

November 9th, 1938 was Krystallnacht. Men came and ransacked the home. They broke most of the dishes and destroyed most of the furniture. Among other things, they knocked down the Shabbes lamp, chipping it on one corner.

During the next several months, Jews were ordered to turn in objects made of metal, such as the Shabbes lamp. Ilse's father, Meinhardt Lichtenstein, was a good friend and neighbor of the Chief of Police in town. They had served together during the First World War. Ilse's father gave the police chief the Shabbes lamp for safekeeping. Ilse's mother brought over some linens and a coffee set—the only dishes not damaged by the Nazis on Krystallnacht—as well.

Less than eight weeks later, in January of 1939, Ilse and her sister left for Holland on a Kindertransport. While there, she received an affidavit to sail to America. She boarded the last ship that sailed to America before Hitler invaded Holland in May of 1940. Her sister never received an affidavit, so, after the invasion, she had to return to Germany.



During the war, Ilse's parents, her sister, and virtually the entire Jewish community of Volksmarsen, perished. After the war, Ilse married and raised a family. Many years passed.

In 1983, she finally decided to return to Germany. On the way back from a trip to Israel, she stopped in her hometown to show her son where she'd been raised. The Chief of Police had died, but his son was alive and still living in the town. Ilse and her son visited him. He welcomed them warmly. In due course, he brought out the linens and the coffee set. He'd kept them all that time, safe and sound.

Then it occurred to Ilse to ask about the lamp. By any chance did my father give your father a Shabbes lamp?" she asked. "I have no other object from my father's family. I'd so much like to have it."

"Why, yes, he did," the Chief's son replied. "But I had no idea that it belonged to you. I thought it must have belonged to the synagogue, and that's why your father had given it to my father."

"Well, what happened to it?" she asked.

"About eleven years ago, in 1972, we were visited by the first Jew who had lived here to come back after the war. Since I had assumed that the lamp belonged to the synagogue, and so was Jewish community property, I thought it only right that some Jewish person should get the lamp. So I took it out and gave it to him."

Ilse described it, and explained that she was certain that the lamp he had been holding onto was the lamp that had been in their home, and asked him if he minded if she were to call the man to whom he had given it. He didn't object. He felt terrible that he had handed it over.

When Ilse returned to the States she called the man—lets call him "Hans"—a man who'd emigrated from their town in the mid 1930's.

"I understand that you have a lamp given to you by the son of the police chief in town. He thought it had been in the shul, but he was mistaken."

"You know," he said, "I didn't go to the shul very much, so I didn't know what was in there."

"Well, it belonged to my family," Ilsa said. She described the chip on one corner, the rings to support candles as well as oil lamps.

"Finder's keepers!" he said. "I was the first one back; it's mine now."

"But it was in our family home! You were able to bring all of your possessions out of Germany. I came out with nothing!"

The man refused to budge. Ilse's pleas were to no avail.

In 1991, Ilse was invited back to Volksmarsen at the German government's expense. The town was establishing a museum. They wanted to interview all of the Jewish survivors and have them speak. She went and, while there, saw Hans who had also returned. She begged, she pleaded with him to give her the Shabbes lamp, but he said, "No." "The lamp is mine," he said. "It's my prized possession. I'm not giving it up."

Other folks who'd come back for the reunion were sympathetic. "We'll see to it that you get it back," they said. But nothing happened. She returned to Louisville, Hans returned to New York, and she virtually lost hope that she'd ever see that lamp again.

Ten years passed.

In the summer of 2001, Ilse got a call. It was Hans. He needed to talk to her. He was miserable. His wife of 57 years had divorced him. He had had to leave his home. He wasn't well. Could he visit? he asked.

She was lukewarm to the idea.

"There was one thing I was able to take with me from my home," he said. "It's the Shabbes lamp," he said. "And I'm going to send it to you."

He called every few weeks, just to talk. His calls kept coming -- but not the Shabbes lamp. At one point, Ilse called him. She felt sorry for him. He was too ill to come to the phone.

Finally, a package arrived with the lamp inside. She cried the entire day. She called Hans to thank him.

"I hope you enjoy it," he said.

"How could I not?" she replied. "It's the only object left from my father's family."

Not too long thereafter, during the week between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur just one year ago, Hans died.

* * * * *

How many of us are putting off righting a wrong, making amends, simply saying, "We're sorry." *teshuvah* is all about eventually owning up to our responsibilities and acting on them.

There's a passage in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "M'uvat lo yuchal litkon; v'khesron lo yuchal l'himanot." -- "What is twisted cannot be made straight; what is lacking cannot be made good." (1:15) There is a midrash on that verse that says that this is only true in the world to come. In this world, in the world of the living, that which is twisted can be made straight; someone who lacks something can, sometimes, have it restored. Maybe not entirely: after all, the chip on that Shabbes lamp can never be perfectly fixed -- and it would perhaps be a mistake to try to do so. But there is much more within our power than we sometimes recognize.

As long as we are alive, it's never too late to do *teshuvah*.

There's an addendum to Ilse Meyer's story. Just last week, she got a call from Volksmarsen. It was the daughter of that Chief of Police, with whom Ilse had stayed in touch. She was calling to tell her that an elderly woman who lived in the town for many years had just died. In her home, the woman's daughter had found a sewing machine that had been in the home for many, many years. She realized that it had originally belonged to Ilse's father, Meinhardt Lichtenstein, and so she brought it to the town hall. The police chief's daughter was calling Ilse to determine what to do with it. In the meantime, they placed the sewing machine in the museum under a picture of her father.

What is *teshuvah*? *teshuvah* is usually translated as “repentance,” which conjures up all sorts of lofty images in our minds, yet the root of the word actually means simply to “turn” or to “return.”

teshuvah marks a turning away from behavior that we have come to realize is wrong. Did we know it was wrong when we acted the way we did? Maybe yes, maybe no. That's what we mean when we talk about sins that are “yod'im v'lo yod'im”—sins that we commit knowingly and unwittingly, intentionally or inadvertently. At a certain point in time, whenever that time happens to come, we say, “Dayeinu!” “Enough!” And we turn. It's an amazing thing, “*teshuvah*”: it reminds us that we have free will and we can determine how we're going to live our lives. Even if we've acted a certain rationalizing, self-justifying way for ten, twenty, thirty years, we can turn away from it. If we've held on to someone else's property for 29 years, as Hans did, we are not condemned to do so forever. We can return it and restore it to its rightful owner. Even if we've participated in a monstrous injustice, we can still choose, fifty years later, to try to do right by the survivors of those whom we've oppressed.

There is a serious impediment to *teshuvah*, and that is shame. It is, after all, difficult to admit that we have made a mistake. It's embarrassing. It is, momentarily at least, an admission that we are behaving beneath the level at which we can and should. Such admissions—whether to ourselves or to others—are difficult.

That's probably the main reason why *teshuvah* doesn't always come as soon as it should. But rather than dismissing the procrastinators, the foot-draggers, our tradition suggests that God welcomes *teshuvah* whenever it comes. Think how much shame that town had to overcome to create a museum highlighting and displaying evidence of its repulsive and reprehensible behavior, its own disgrace. Yet, forty-six years after the end of World War II, the town was able to do just that.

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer, that we recited on Rosh Hashanah and will do so again tomorrow, teaches us that, unlike human beings, God has infinite patience. In the words of the prayer, “God takes no delight in the death of the one who is condemned by his behavior; rather He prefers that he turn from his path and live.”¹ He's prepared to wait “ad yom moto”—until the day of one's death. Even then, if someone should repent—if someone should turn aside and make amends—“miyad tikablo”—“[God] welcomes him at once.” God understands that we are only human, and our lives are often ruled by drives, by instincts that get the better of us. If we overcome those

impediments to virtue — whenever that happens — it’s deserving of acknowledgement. (Better late, than never.)

It can also be the source of enormous relief. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer is better known for its teaching that *teshuvah* is one of those activities that—together with prayer and acts of righteousness—can diminish the severity of our fate. Who doesn’t believe that? Who doesn’t believe that Volksmarsen is a more appropriate place to visit than it was before 1991? Who doesn’t believe that Hans died with a clearer conscience and more at peace with himself, having returned that Shabbes lamp?

teshuvah doesn’t just mean to turn; it means to re-turn. Most of us have consciences. We know how we’re supposed to behave. We just don’t always do what we’re supposed to do, and then, either thoughtlessly or willfully, we try to convince ourselves that everything is o.k., that there’s no need to look at what we’ve done or to do anything about it.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev used to say, “Everywhere I go, I am going to myself.” Levi Yitzhak was not self-centered. What did he mean by this? He meant that he was constantly striving to remind himself of, and to refocus himself on, the proper course for him to follow. Sin is a diversion from the true course we should follow, which is one centered on our values.

Where are we centered? We can’t do *teshuvah* unless we know! So the first step is to clarify what we believe in and where we stand. Only then can we effectively return from pathways that are deviations from this.

Rabbi Bradley Artson offers a beautiful interpretation of the poem, “Ki Hinei Ka-Homer.” (“We are like clay in the hands of the potter.”) He reminds us that, in order to make a pot, a ceramicist takes a lump of clay and places it in the center of a potter’s wheel. Then, as the wheel spins, he or she helps the clay remain centered. If he doesn’t, the clay will soon become unstable. By “giving a nudge, adding pressure, the potter hopes to keep the clay in its proper balance, centered, allowing the pot to grow.” The clay can grow only if it is centered.

The same is true of us. Do we know where we are centered? Unless we do, we can’t grow. What is that part of ourselves that we dare not abandon, lest we spin out of control? That police chief never forgot who he was. And he taught his children never to forget who they were. That family remained centered all those years. Somehow, Hans came to understand that keeping that Shabbes lamp was keeping him off-center. He came to see that no object was worth that moral and spiritual imbalance.

* * * * *

Life is short. We needn’t, we shouldn’t, wait too long. Like that Shabbes lamp that was restored to its rightful place, let us return and be restored. Let’s not wait twenty-nine, or forty-six or sixty years. Let’s not wait another day. Let’s take full advantage of this holy day. Let’s take the time—on this day—to explore our priorities and our behavior; let’s learn what it is we’re doing that is keeping us off-centered. Let’s turn away from those activities and let’s return ourselves, as we should, to the true center of our lives.

Let us begin today. *Amen.*