

**Rosh Hashana Sermon - KE - Transforming Ourselves and the World
October 1, 2019**

(Sing Hashiveinu.)

We love this chant. It has become a signature song of ours at Kol Emeth, especially on the chagim. The melody is beautiful, our voices making music together are beautiful, and the words are most beautiful of all.

Please open your machzor to page 123, so we can take a close look at this remarkable verse together.

Return us, O God, to You, and we will return. (Lam. 5:21) With all of our talk over the Yamim Nora'im about the hard work of teshuvah that we need to do, we begin here by asking God to return us -- to begin the teshuvah process for us. According to the verse, only once God invites us to return can we then do our teshuvah. The words suggest an exquisite mutuality, as if God asks us to dance the dance of teshuvah together.

There's much more to be said about this, but today I want to focus on the final words of the verse, a bit more perplexing, and easily missed.

“Hadesh yameinu k’kedem.” “Renew our days as of old.” What does this mean?

Some have suggested that *“k’kedem”* - days of old - refers to a time in history when we as a people were more virtuous than we are now. Or maybe *“k’kedem”* refers to the Garden of Eden, as this language is used in the 3rd chapter of Genesis. By this logic, *“kedem”* evokes the perfection of the Garden of Eden - before humanity knew sin or self-consciousness or alienation from God.

To me, the verse suggests that there was a time in our own lives when we were pure, when we were new - open to others and to life itself. Imagine the face of a child in your life. There is something about the pure innocence of children, who - when they are fortunate enough to be given what they need, are open, joyful and loving. They feel what they feel. They reach out for love. They laugh with their whole hearts and their whole bodies. Perhaps the verse suggests that that innocent, open-hearted child still lives within us, no matter how old we are, and that we can, with God’s help, be returned to that state of goodness and beauty.

My teacher Sylvia Boorstein says that the human mind, undisturbed by fear or pain, is naturally kind. The verse seems to suggest this: that our natural condition is a state of purity, of newness, of readiness to face life with an open heart. But

the pains and wounds we experience in our lives can gradually block our ability to be our best selves. And so the verse invites us to pray: Renew us, O God; make us again as we were before hurt, sorrow, and fear made us less generous, less loving, and less brave than we would like to be.

But one of my very favorite Hasidic texts suggests an entirely different interpretation of “*hadesh yameinu k’kedem.*” Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev asks our question:

What is the meaning of the word ‘k’kedem’ - ‘as of old’? . . .

This is what it means: each and every Jew must believe with complete trust that in each and every moment we are revived and sustained by the Holy Creator. This is what the Sages taught on the verse, “Let all that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps.150:6): “with each and every breath praise the Lord” (Genesis Rabbah 14:9). Each moment the life force seeks to leave the body, yet each moment the Holy One sends renewed vigor.

From this we can understand that every person has the capacity to experience teshuvah. In the moment that a person transforms oneself through teshuvah, one

also comes to believe that we have become a new creation. On that basis the Holy One, in God's great mercy, does not recall our earlier transgressions. . . .

This, then, explains . . . the verse from Lamentations. "Take us back, O God, to You, and we shall return." How shall we return? "Make us new, as we were in the beginning." That is, "make us new" in the verse means, "Make us a new being, free of the sins of the past."

The theological logic is clear, and breath-taking: the breath is a gift from God. If God did not want us to continue living, God would not give us our next breath, and we would cease to live. So with each breath, we are reborn. We are a new person, completely different from the person we were a moment ago. And that, according to Levi Yitzhak, is why teshuvah is possible. The sins that we once committed belong to the person in the past. That person no longer exists. In this moment, we are radically renewed, and everything is possible.

Try to quiet the rational, analytic part of your mind for just a moment. Imagine - as you might encounter this image in a work of art or a poem - that with each breath we take we are reborn. We are an utterly new person.

Let's all stop and breathe together - to take in this radical idea - that each breath brings completely new possibilities. Take a breath - then another - then one more.

To be clear, I don't believe that this teaching means to suggest an abdication of our responsibility for our actions. Of course we must atone and make amends for sins we committed in our "past lives." Rather, what Levi Yitzhak is giving us in this teaching is a dramatic statement about the possibility of radical transformation, in every moment. The process of teshuvah depends on it.

I want to ask you, if you believed this - - not the way one believes a scientific argument, but the way one finds truth in a poem or a work of art - - if you believed that in this moment you are renewed, and things are possible that were not available for you before, who would you like to be?

I ask you to close your eyes for a moment, or look down at the floor just ahead of your toes. Ask yourself: If you believed that with each breath, new things are possible, what would you want to add to your character next time you breathe in? What capacity would you like to develop more deeply than you have before?
[PAUSE] And ask yourself a second question: If you believed that with each

breath, you could be different than you were before, what tendency or habit would you remove from your personality, in order to step into life renewed?

I hope you're with me, because now I want to ask you to take an even greater leap of spiritual imagination. Remember, in each moment, with each breath, we are new. We are given new life and a world of new potential. Levi Yitzhak gave us this image in connection to individual lives.

What if the same were true of humanity as a whole? Like I said, this is a big stretch. So let me share another poetic image. Pablo Neruda has an extraordinary poem called "Keeping Quiet," in which he imagines that for just a moment the entire world pauses. All the talking stops. All the noises cease. All of humanity chooses to devote a single moment to a shared experience of silence.

The poem stops there, but I want to ask: what would happen in the next moment after the silence, when we all returned to speech and to work and to ordinary activity? Would the shared moment of silence - experienced all across the world - change us? Would the world be different?

Sylvia Boorstein writes, "Suppose people everywhere simultaneously stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only so long as it took to recognize their shared humanity. Surely the heartbreak of the world's pain, visible to all,

would convert everyone to kindness.” (Sylvia Boorstein, *Pay Attention, For Goodness Sake*, pp. 10-1)

This is surely a leap of spiritual imagination. But I suggest to you that prayer requires such creative vision. And so does teshuvah. How are we to change in the coming year if we cannot imagine that something radically new is possible?

So, too, how are we to change our society - or change our world - even in small ways - if we cannot envision the society or the world we wish to see? What would you most like to see changed in the year to come? A society oriented toward the common good and interdependence rather than to rhetorical warfare? An end to the epidemic of gun violence? An Israel free of threat and fear? A world of empathy for the plight of refugees, people who must leave their homes because of violence or abject poverty? The human family turning to prevent climate catastrophe?

Back down on earth, what would it take to make such a vision real in our own lives and in the world?

It seems to me that there are two *middot* that are essential for this process, and therefore central to the process of teshuvah - on both the individual and

collective levels. Those *middot* are hope and *zerizut* (alacrity, or intentional effort). I'd like to speak briefly about each of these.

Hope does not mean living in fairy land, pretending that the real world does not exist. It does not mean denying reality or the evidence of our senses or suddenly believing in magic.

Rather, hope means living in a way that is both grounded in reality and aware that life frequently changes beyond what is evident in the present. To live with hope is to make our way through this life, with all of its challenges, obstacles, and frustrations, and also to know that some of the inevitable changes that life will bring will be changes for the better.

Hope, then, is the antidote to one of the chief obstacles to teshuvah, which is despair. It is natural to say to ourselves -- I am (in my case), nearly 65 years old; I haven't been able to change this annoying quirk of my personality that regularly gets me in trouble. By this logic, teshuvah would be impossible. Rather, according to Rav Yisrael Salanter, "One should not say: that which God has created is unchangeable, nor should one say that if God has planted with me bad character, how can I hope to uproot it. That is not so. The character traits of a person can be conquered and even changed. We find that animals can be tamed,

their nature changed and their evil roots uprooted. So, too, humankind has the strength to conquer their evil nature and even change it to good through study and habit.” [*Ohr Yisrael*, Letter 30] And, in the words of Rav Kook in *Orot Hateshuvah*, “This is the entire basis of penitence: the elevation of the will, and changing it to good, to go out of darkness to light, from the valley of despair to the door of hope.” (Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Lights of Penitence*, 113)

But we need more than hope to make change happen in our lives and in the world. Being able to envision a better reality is a necessary condition for change, but an insufficient one. We must believe that change is possible. And we must work to get there. We must apply ourselves: addressing each unholy habit or social injustice step by step, one action at a time, consistently over time, trusting that these actions will add up to a beautiful new way of living - for us as individuals and for our society.

This is the work of the *middah* of *zerizut* - - translated as “alacrity,” “zeal,” or “energetic effort.” One classic Rabbinic source on *zerizut* says that “*Zerizim makdimin l’mitzvot.*” When you have a mitzvah to perform, do not do everything else on your desk, check your email one more time, run a quick errand, and verify

that no one else has already attended to this need. Rather, get up early in the morning to respond to the call to engage in this sacred activity. (This is why, for example, a bris is usually held in the morning, and Hanukah candles are traditionally lit just after sunset - when the time for the mitzvah has just arrived.)

To practice *zerizut* in the context of *teshuvah*, either individual or collective, is to bring our full energy, our time, our gifts, and our willpower to move in the direction of the change we want to see. It is to push past inertia, overwhelm, and self-doubt. It is to quiet the inner voice that might say, “How could this possibly make any difference?” or “Do I have it in me to do this?” and do it anyway. It is to put our body, our time, and our energy where our values are, in the pursuit of a vision that we know is sacred - for our own growth or for the betterment of the world.

One final teaching about *zerizut* accords with contemporary management theory. As you may know, so-called “SMART” goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. The Mussar masters similarly teach that when we want to change a soul trait to reach for a higher level in ourselves, we should not reach for the sky, setting goals at which we will surely fail, grow discouraged, and drop.

Rather, we should choose behavioral goals that are specific (not “I will be kinder” but “I will focus on being kind for the first ten minutes of my morning staff meeting this week); measurable (I will say three kind things a day to my partner or housemate); and similarly, achievable, realistic, and timely (within a specific period of time).

Thus, trying to change American immigration policy, in this sense, is not a “SMART” goal for an individual to pursue, because it is not something one person can singlehandedly accomplish. A smart goal would be to do three meaningful actions each week - things like writing my member of Congress, contributing to a deportation defense fund or an immigrant rights organization, signing an online petition, or calling an immigrant friend or colleague to ask how they are doing.

The Mussar tradition, remarkably verified by contemporary neuroscience, teaches that habits are more effectively changed by making a series of small actions rather than a single action. (I’m more likely to become more generous by giving \$1 each day to tzedakah for 100 days rather than writing a single \$100 check.) This logic, according to the Mussar masters, applies to changing a personal habit that does

harm to us and to our relationships. I believe that the same logic applies to the process of social change.

For this work of teshuvah - both personal and collective - we need a combination of hope and *zerizut*. We must envision our goal - -be it a kinder, more generous, less judgmental version of myself, or progress toward a more just and compassionate world. And we must apply ourselves, small action by small action, day after day, encounter after encounter, trusting that this is the path to transformation.

I close with a teaching that serendipitously arrived in my inbox late last week, from the Hartman Institute, adapted from the teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav: “Know and believe that every day, at any time, at any moment, you can renew yourself and become a brand new being. So we must be strong and always begin anew, for sometimes we must start afresh many times on but a single day.”

Remember, in each moment, with each breath, you are renewed, and - with a combination of hope and focused action - teshuvah is within your grasp.

Wishing you a new year of peace and blessing, and for the world, a year of more love and justice.