

## SEVEN THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT TESHUVAH FROM MY SABBATICAL

How wonderful it is to be back, to see everyone!

Many people have asked me about my sabbatical, I had the opportunity to talk with a group back in August, share a few experiences. And I've tried to share some insights in my last couple of newsletter columns. Many people want to know what I did, how it was. To be honest, it wasn't the most exciting 10 months of "doing"—beyond a wonderful week in Southern Spain with my mother in the spring, not too many adventures. But it was an important experience for me, and I do want to share it with you in some way that might be useful. So my topic for tonight:

### Seven Things I Learned About Teshuvah From My Sabbatical

#### #1. Change, even good change, makes me really cranky

In retrospect, one of the oddest things about going on sabbatical is that I spent the first three months in a state of anxiety and crankiness. There was certainly an initial sense of elation—knowing, in those first days of sabbatical, that I had a full 10 months before me that were completely open. Add to that an initial week spent on retreat in the mountains of New Mexico, then coming home to the Red Sox beating the New York Yankees for the American League Championship and going on to win the World Series, and it's definitely true that last October had its peak moments. But those peak moments were followed a few weeks later by an election day that was, for me, like I know for many of us here, a disheartening crash into despondency and dismay.

It is tempting to attribute my uneasy and anxious feelings of last fall to the aftermath of the elections. But it was more than that. In retrospect I am able to see the ways in which coming into a space like sabbatical was highly anxiety-provoking in its own right. It was hard to suddenly be outside of the professional identity and activity that give meaning and focus to my everyday life. It was hard to suddenly have no set schedule and no obligations to give shape to my days, beyond driving Zoe to school a few mornings a week and doing the shopping and the cooking. I seemed to spend a lot of those initial days and weeks wondering what it was I should be doing, and assuming that whatever I was doing was not enough, not quite the right thing, not sufficient in some way.

The truth was that I was making a major shift in my life, even if it was a temporary shift. And the reality is that transition, any transition, is anxiety-provoking. Even making a change that is enormously beneficial—which ultimately my sabbatical was—is not without this element of anxiety, of unease. I couldn't just jump from the first week of my sabbatical into the fourth month of it; there was no avoiding that transitional phase.

So, as we enter into these Ten Days of Teshuvah, this period of "turning," of attempting to make change in our lives, this is an important thing to keep in mind. We need to remember that a period of anxiety, of confusion and crankiness, is a usual and necessary phase of coming into a place that is new. And even knowing this won't help you avoid it. It's just something that can

be recognized as it's happening, with the hope of not beating ourselves up too much for experiencing it.

## #2. What I learned from my pants

One interesting aspect of my sabbatical was that I didn't wear about 80 percent of the clothing in my closet for those 10 months. It's amazing how few clothes you need when you're not working or meeting with people every day! So this fall, when I took down a couple pairs of pants to wear for the first time in a year, I discovered that the elastic in the waistbands was no longer elastic. I had no idea that if you don't use elastic over a long period of time, it loses its elasticity, it loses its ability to hold tight, to bounce back.

So what my wardrobe taught me about *teshuvah* is this: just as I should have been wearing some of my clothes more regularly to keep them in good shape, so is *teshuvah* an ongoing process, not something we can effectively do just once a year. The work of reflection and renewal can't really be jammed into a few days in the fall, but needs to be incorporated into the weekly and monthly rhythms of our lives.

The challenge here is to think about how we can structure our lives in order to regularly stretch ourselves in this way. One method is to use the rhythms of the Jewish calendar, the cycle of the week and the months and the year. Every Friday, every erev Shabbat, we're given the opportunity to think back on the week, to let go of what we need to let go of, as we prepare to enter into Shabbat. And every erev Rosh Chodesh, the day before the new Hebrew month, we're given a "Yom Kippur katan," a mini-Yom Kippur, to reflect on the month that has passed and to think about what we'd like to do differently in the new month ahead. And then every year, of course, we're given these High Holydays, this opportunity to enter into a new year without the baggage of the 12 months past. But the truth is that we're able to make more of this yearly opportunity if we've been doing some part of the work all along, making our efforts of *teshuvah*, of "turning" onto a wholesome and fulfilling path, part of our lives throughout the seasons of the year.

## #3. Acknowledging where we're at

One of the most important moments of my sabbatical came in January, during a contemplative retreat for rabbis. I was about four months into the sabbatical, and I was getting frustrated that I wasn't feeling happier in the experience, that my meditation and prayer practice wasn't bringing me much joy, that my general crankiness persisted. Then that morning, during a Shacharit service, I realized that I was simply depleted. For whatever reason, I had come to a point in my life of feeling like I just had nothing left. My spiritual gas tank was on empty.

As soon as that thought formed in my mind, I felt both a sense of sadness, but also an amazing sense of relief. I took that realization of depletion that morning, and offered it up as my prayer. This is all I have, I was saying, and this is all I can offer. And from that moment on I knew what my sabbatical was really about—it was about becoming renewed and replenished, on a level I hadn't even been fully aware I needed. And the way to do that was, ultimately, just to be aware that that was what I needed, and to be willing to ask the universe for help.

I think this is a critical step in any kind of teshuvah, any kind of path of return and renewal. First, we have to be able to admit where we are, to say honestly this is what I have, this is what I don't have, in this moment. And not to be angry with ourselves about that truth, and not to wish we were somewhere else. Just to acknowledge it, this is where I am. From that place, we can ask for what we really need. I had no idea, in that moment, what I needed in any concrete way—I didn't know what to *do*; it wasn't about knowing how to fix a problem. It was just a matter of asking for what I needed—to have my gas tank refilled, to get back into a place of abundance. In that moment I set an intention for the rest of the year, and opened myself up to whatever answer I might get in response.

#4. We have all the time that we need.

I learned a lot about time on my sabbatical. I was taking a radical break from my usual schedule, a schedule that is normally filled with endless “to do” lists, with days that are broken down into task-filled intervals that I can check off as each task is accomplished (or not).

It was amazing to me at first how a day could be filled even when there was only one thing that I would consider an “activity” per day. I might get to a museum for an hour or two, or sit down in Panera and read for a few hours. But just the simple activities of life—shopping and cooking, getting some exercise, spending time with the kids, doing the laundry—all those things could easily fill the rest of the day. And I persisted in thinking that all of those things were somehow not really “doing” anything --or at least, not doing whatever it was I thought I should be doing on my sabbatical.

So my first learning was that in fact I was “doing” as much as I ever do. It's just that my usual check-list of things accomplished when I'm working gives me an *illusion* of productivity without necessarily being more “productive” in any real sense. But beyond that, I learned something about time. I learned that we have exactly as much time as we need. Or, more accurately, we have exactly as much time as there is. There are always 24 hours in a day. We can't “save” time, we can't “make” time, we can't “waste” or “use” time. We can do what we can do and get done what we can get done in any given 24 hours, but time itself is not really affected.

What we can change is our experience of time. We can choose to feel rushed and harried, or we can acknowledge that we will or will not get done what we'd like to get done by a certain time of the day. We can “get through” our day, or we can be *in* our day, and in whatever it is that we're doing in any given moment. We can be in contention with our sense of time, or we can do our best to be in the present moment, with whatever it brings us.

The rabbis of the Talmud taught that teshuvah existed before the creation of the world—that teshuvah, the possibility of transformation, pre-exists the realm of time and space. Based on this teaching, the Me'or Eynayim, Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, teaches that teshuvah exists in a realm in which time is not operative. Teshuvah can happen any moment, in a moment. Our challenge, then, when thinking about teshuvah, isn't necessarily to “do” anything, but to shift ourselves into a space where we can simply be. The goal is not to add “personal transformation” to our already over-scheduled to-do list—“pick up kids, feed the dog, get to Stop

and Shop, develop greater wisdom and patience, make dinner”—but to make space in our lives for the practice of just being. We can’t do real teshuvah if we’re in a never-ending, head-long rush to accomplish, to achieve, to accumulate, all the time. Teshuvah happens—life happens—when we stop. When we decide to allow ourselves to be fully in the flow of time, to exist right here, in this moment, then there is the potential of everything opening up to us.

#5. What you are meant to do may not be what you think you need or want to do.

Before I went on sabbatical, I had a lot of ideas of what I might do during those 10 months. I thought maybe I’d start writing a book, or at least produce a few articles. I thought I’d get a lot more politically active, or perhaps volunteer regularly in a place I wouldn’t normally get to spend time in. I thought I’d get outdoors a lot more, really get to spend time in nature.

In the end, I didn’t do as much of any of that as I’d thought. I did write one article, for the Reconstructionist magazine. I didn’t volunteer or become particularly more politically active than normal, although I did begin a project working with Jewish social justice activists last winter. And I didn’t get outside much, mostly because the weather was lousy.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Barbara Penzner, also went on sabbatical during this time, and she told me a month or so before it started that she’d signed up for voice lessons and drawing classes. I immediately panicked. Why wasn’t I signing up for any lessons? I like music, I like to do art. Maybe I really was a failure at this whole sabbatical thing. If I wasn’t going to be more political, more active, more artistic, then what in the world was I doing?

In the end, I think I ended up doing more or less what I was meant to do during my sabbatical. Are there a million things I love to do and can imagine would have been wonderful to do during this time? Of course. But apparently those things were not what I was meant to do. I realized by about March that I didn’t want to take voice or art or any other kinds of lessons because the point of this sabbatical time wasn’t for me to get *better* at anything. Once I’d realized that, I could bring a beautiful easel my dad bought for me years ago up from the basement, and make some paintings just for my own enjoyment. I found myself spending a fair bit of time sitting in the coffeeshop Panera near my house, reading books about process theology and thinking about God (which you’ll hear more about tomorrow). And I put effort into exercising and taking better care of my body, and trying to meditate and pray in the mornings on a somewhat regular basis. I even learned how to tie tefillin, which I’d never done before.

The teaching in all of this, for me, is that sometimes what we’re meant to do is not what we think we’d like to do or even what we initially think we need to do. Sometimes, in order to get ourselves onto the right path, we have to get beyond our thoughts of “should.” We paint ourselves into such tight corners with our sense of “should,” our narrow ideas of who we are and what we need. Sometimes we just have to trust that our path is waiting for us, and our work is not to figure it out beforehand, but to get ourselves to a place where the path can open up before us. It’s about learning to listen to ourselves, to really listen, without too many preconceptions. And it’s about being open, being willing to be surprised.

It's not easy to do this, I'll be the first to admit. Those nagging fears about whether or not sitting in Panera reading for five hours was really a legitimate activity continued to nag me. And I never quite lost the feeling that I was letting precious sabbatical time slip by without getting in all that I wanted or needed to do. But the reality is this: by the end of my sabbatical, when it was time to start transitioning back into my work at Dorshei Tzedek, I realized in a very powerful way that I was indeed replenished. That empty tank had gotten refilled. I don't know how it happened, and I have no idea if it could have happened in a different way. But my sabbatical achieved what I had realized in January I needed it to achieve. And the truth is that I couldn't have predicted either that need nor the way to fill it before the whole experience began.

#6. What's the real point, anyway?

A few weeks after getting back from that retreat in January, I had an interesting experience one morning. I was thinking through my day, and saying to myself, "Okay, if I just do my morning prayer and meditation practice for half an hour, then I can get to the gym, and get to the store, and then get home by this time, and get it all done." And then I stopped, and remembered my intention about replenishment and renewal, and I realized I had it totally backwards. The main "activity" was my meditation and prayer practice, that was what I needed; everything else would have to come after that. My spiritual practice wasn't something to get out of the way, it *was* the way. I had to keep reminding myself of this, over and over; I still do.

The teaching for our teshuvah practice is I think the same. Teshuvah is really the work of living, of being fully alive. Of course we need to earn enough to have a roof over our heads and food to eat; of course we both need and want to be fulfilled in our work and our volunteer activities, in our relationships with others; of course we have obligations that others impose upon us that we must attend to. But none of that is why we are here. We are here to become fully human, to become fully ourselves. We are here to do whatever our part is in creating a world where everyone can achieve their own full humanity. That is the path of teshuvah—returning to our true selves, turning and returning on a path that connects us to the Source of Life, to our own wellsprings of renewal. But in our world today we tend to turn this upside down. We are driven to accumulate and achieve as if those activities contain some answer to the meaning of our lives. We tend to take care of ourselves in service to something else—to be able to work harder, to be able to live longer, but for what?

We do teshuvah not to get somewhere else. We do teshuvah to be able to be here, right here, in the fullness of this moment and the fullness of ourselves. Teshuvah means to come back—to this. There is really nowhere else to go. So what could be of more importance than nurturing those aspects of ourselves that help us become present, that help us be in this world in an open, compassionate, joyful way?

#7. It takes a community

One thing I was very aware of during my sabbatical, and which I continue to keep in mind, is the extent to which I could not have had this experience on my own. My partner, Gina, had to agree to have a year in which our income would be significantly reduced. This congregation had to commit a significant amount of money to make my sabbatical possible, and be willing to have a

different kind of year while I was away. I know there are some very positive and important things that emerged here in my absence, and I know that in certain ways it was a difficult year for the community. I also know that it was an absolutely necessary experience for me, and my gratitude towards this community for making it possible is enormous. Thank you. And for any ways in which my absence caused pain or harm to anyone here, I sincerely ask forgiveness.

The teshuvah teaching in this is about the need for community as we go on our spiritual journeys. Would that we could, as a congregation, grant each of our members 6 to 10 months of time off! That might not be possible, but we can support one another in our work of teshuvah. I will go into this in more depth on Yom Kippur, but suffice it to say here that we shouldn't think we need to do our teshuvah work alone. We need supports along the way. While the work we have to do might ultimately be very personal, we would be mistaken to think this is a solitary journey. Once I realized what I needed during my sabbatical, once I realized the ways I was depleted and wanted to be filled, I talked about it—I told people. Not because I was necessarily asking anything of them, but because it was important to say it out loud, to have it out there in the world. And sometimes I did need to ask things of some people, to get help in where I was trying to go.

We need support on our individual journeys—we need teachers, companions, friends, those who challenge us. These might be people we know well, they might be people we encounter along the way. But we need to get beyond the American model of ‘pulling ourselves by our bootstraps,’ by the myth of ‘self-sufficiency.’ No one and nothing is self-sufficient. We need to do teshuvah for our own sakes, and we need one another to be doing their work, both for their sake and for ours. On some level we really are in this together, and it is in all of our self-interest to support one another on this path.

So my prayer for us for these *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, these Ten Days of Teshuvah stretching from this evening through Yom Kippur, is that we may be a good community for one another as we each explore our own path of turning and return. Even if we spend all of the time in services wrapped in our own tallit and not even looking at anyone else, we are supported just by the fact that all of us are here, that our voices and our presence fill this room. The intention that each of you brings to these services, the quality of your attention, your silence, your singing, your davvening, your reflection—all of those things add to all of our experiences.

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