

Seeing Clearly (or as best we can)
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769

Tonight we usher in the *aseret yamei teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Teshuvah, from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. “Teshuvah” means “return,” an image which I love. The notion here is that our challenge at this time of year is not to overcome our true nature, but rather to return to our true nature, to the *yetzer tov*, the tendency towards good, inherent in each of us. We return to our Source, to the holy point within each of us.

However optimistic this imagery of *teshuvah* may be, that doesn't mean it's particularly easy to do. The work of *teshuvah*, of turning back to the right path, back into alignment with our best selves, is not something we can complete during these next ten days. Rather, we are given this time to gather our energies, to renew our intentions, and to give some thought to what it is we are asked to confront within ourselves this year.

To help with that thinking, I'd like to talk with you tonight about:

“7 things I Learned This Summer About *Teshuvah* From Getting Progressive Lenses.”

Lesson #1: I will put off change for as long as possible.

I first got eyeglasses when I was in my early 20s, in college. I had become nearsighted, and needed glasses to be able to see what my professors were writing up at the front of the class, and also for when I drove. My vision deteriorated slightly over the ensuing decades, but nothing too dramatic.

About five years ago, when I turned 40, I went to the eye doctor for a check-up and to see if I needed a new prescription. He told me I was about two years away from needing bifocals, and that he'd see me when I came back for my regular check-up in two years.

Well, I'm embarrassed to admit, I didn't go back for a new prescription until this past April. In the intervening 5 years, I could tell my sight was getting worse. I now had to remove my glasses when I wanted to read. The worst was working on the computer—glasses on to see the screen, off to read something on my desk, on again to see what I was typing. And trying to see my *siddur*, my prayerbook, on the bimah, was getting increasingly challenging. I knew it was time to get my eyes checked, but it was so easy to put it off. My vision wasn't horrible, and although taking my glasses off and putting them on again all the time was sort of a pain, it wasn't unmanageable.

And so it is with *teshuvah*. We're not usually that eager to make change, especially when we can more or less manage with life as it's been. A few adjustments here and there, some inconveniences, we muddle along. The thought that yes, yes, there's some work I need to do, but there just isn't time right now. And just like that, something we know we needed to deal with yesterday is still with us, five years later.

So, this past spring I finally made my way back to the ophthalmologist, and indeed, I needed new glasses. In fact, I needed either trifocals or progressive lenses. I got my prescription, and a few weeks later, ordered my glasses. I went to pick them up and put them on, ready for my new, perfected vision—and—I hated them. Not mere dislike. I hated my progressive lenses. Which leads me to –

Lesson #2: However much a change is needed, the old situation looks pretty good sometimes in comparison.

So, with my new glasses on, I teetered out of Costco—yes, I got my new glasses from Costco—and made my way to the car. If I held my head just so, I could look out the top of the glasses and, indeed, things were clearer than they’d been with my old glasses. But if my gaze shifted even slightly down, I was suddenly underwater, and it felt like a miracle that I made it to my car. I couldn’t believe they’d let me drive in this condition.

I think one big obstacle to *teshuvah*, to making real change in our lives, is the misapprehension that everything will feel just right immediately. But change is...change. It’s different. It might be uncomfortable at the beginning. And that discomfort makes our life before suddenly seem, well, just fine, thank you. Sure, it would be nice to be more patient, more giving, more kind—but somehow I got this far with my impatience, my selfishness, my occasional unkindness, so who’s to say I can’t manage for a little while more?

So even though the man at the counter had told me I had to wear my new glasses for a week, that I’d adjust, and whatever I did, not to put my old glasses back on, I decided there was no way I could drive home without crashing into something. I took my old glasses out of the case, put my new glasses in the case, and returned to the realm of the comfortable. I would just have to try again later.

Lesson #3: Sometimes you need to trust what you can (and can’t) see.

When I had gone to pick up my new glasses, the guy at the counter had me put them on and then look at a little card with lettering on it. I immediately noticed that the left side was relatively clear, but on the right side, the mid-range was blurry. I told this to the guy, and asked if maybe something was wrong with the glasses. He assured me that this was common with new progressive lenses, and the blurriness would fade. “But it’s not that bad on the left side,” I said again, “so why is one side completely blurry and the other not?” He insisted that I had to give it a week, and if it was still a problem, to bring them back.

I wore them for about a day and a half, and I knew there was no way I could make it a week. I called my eye doctor back and asked for another appointment, to check the prescription. There had to be something wrong. It turned out the prescription was fine, so I took the glasses back to Costco and the guy at the counter—a different guy this time--made a very slight adjustment, and now the blurriness wasn’t so bad. Vindicated, I decided now I could actually try to wear the things.

Like trying on new glasses, the process of *teshuvah* demands real discernment. To realize where my life is a bit out of whack, to take responsibility for my role in that, and to begin to understand what are the potential changes I need to make to get things on a better track, all these things require a capacity to discern what is, and what is not.

In the case of my glasses, I was correct in sensing that something was amiss, and I needed to trust that. Sometimes in the work of *teshuvah*, you need to trust the evidence of our own eyes, and not go by what others are telling you. Many negative qualities are rewarded in our world. You can get ahead, make money, gain status and stature, by putting others down, cultivating greediness, ignoring your family, not telling the truth. You can be called a fool or weak for making yourself vulnerable, for trusting others, for giving things away. The work of *teshuvah* is the work of developing our own capacity for discerning what is right and what is wrong, what is wholesome and what is unwholesome in our own lives. If the little letters on the card look blurry, they probably are.

Lesson #4: New vision is disorienting.

So, with my newly adjusted new progressive lenses, I decided I was ready to take the plunge, to put away my old pair of glasses, and commit to my new life. For the next few weeks, I felt like I was in badly shot Fellini movie. Things would swim in and out of focus, and I had moments of near panic, afraid I was going to fall down the stairs. Sometimes I felt slightly nauseous, as if I was standing on the deck of bobbing ship. The ophthalmologist had told me to point my nose towards what I wanted to see, and I feared I was going to develop neck problems on top of everything else. I still couldn't believe this was progress over my old eyewear.

I think making real change in our lives is disorienting, as well—which is why we often resist it so mightily. For all our penchant for the new, the prospect of a new self can be a frightening thing. I have often clung to old notions of myself, old patterns of behavior, old defense mechanisms, because I truly believed that I would simply cease to exist if I let them go. To date, I have let go of many old self-conceptions and habits of mind, and I'm still here, and generally better for it. But in those moments leading up to the letting go, and in the immediate aftermath, it's a bit like wearing new glasses. Some things are clearer, and others haven't yet come into focus.

The eye doctor told me that with progressive lenses, the area where I could see clearly would steadily expand over time. I think that's a nice metaphor for making change in our lives—we will experience an ever-increasing area of clarity and focus. If we can hang in there for the initial period of disorientation and fear, the reward is an expanded realm where we can really see more clearly where we are going.

Lesson #5: Trust the process.

I had a moment, a few weeks ago, when I realized I hadn't thought about my glasses for days. This was a revelation! My initial hatred of my glasses had settled, after a few weeks, into a kind of steady annoyance. The mid-range remained problematic for months, and I still had to take the

glasses off entirely to read. To realize that I had gotten so acclimated to my new lenses that I hadn't even thought about them for days was a welcome realization.

When I was first told that I had to wear my new glasses for a week before I decided if I liked them, I thought a week sounded like an impossibly long time. When my eye doctor told me it took about a year for him to get used to wearing his progressive lenses, I decided there was no way in the world I could wait that long.

One real obstacle to *teshuvah* is impatience. We want quick fixes, and it's hard to accept how long it can sometimes take to make real change in our lives. I know that today I am vastly more patient and capable of far more equanimity than my younger self—and I know that that has been a journey of years and years, of decades. It's taken a great deal of dedication and practice. It's also taken some amount of trust, of knowing that investment in everything from therapy to meditation to changing what I eat all adds up over the long haul to a better self. Today, that better self just feels like me, the way these glasses now feel or less normal.

Lesson #6: Nothing's perfect.

A few months after I got my new glasses, I was at a seminar with an old friend whom I hadn't seen in a few years. I was sitting next to her as we read a text, and I started muttering something about still having to take off my glasses to read, and wasn't the whole point of these things that you didn't have to do that?! She told me she'd had her progressive lenses for over a year, and she still took hers off to read. I was shocked. Why hadn't she returned them, demanded her money back?

Now, four months into my new glasses, I still take them off to read, and I've accepted the fact that that just might be the way it is. My now not-so-new glasses aren't the perfect solution to every visual situation.

I find this sort of comforting. I may be a better self than I was 20 years ago, but I am still far from perfect. In fact, I have ceased thinking that perfection is even something I want to strive for. It is possible to continue to challenge ourselves, to take seriously the ongoing work of *teshuvah*, without aiming for some impossibly high ideal. Actually, change is a lot easier if we have some compassion for ourselves, if we can acknowledge that up front that we're going to backslide, make mistakes, continue to miss the mark. It's so easy to set ourselves up for failure if we set our goals far beyond our reach. Our intentions need to be practical and possible. As you think about our own work of *teshuvah* this year, see if you can dedicate yourself to a change that pushes you a bit beyond your comfort zone, and yet still falls well within the realm of possibility.

And finally, Lesson #7:

At the same time that I was having my adventure with my new progressive lenses, my partner Gina got new ones as well. We both went from having glasses for near-sightedness to getting progressive lenses, we both picked them up on the same day from Costco, but the similarities ended there. Whereas I hated my new lenses, couldn't see, felt like I was underwater or worse,

Gina said there was some slight blurriness but nothing too bad. When a few weeks later I was still teetering down the stairs, frantically moving my nose around and squinting like mad, she seemed annoyingly well-adjusted to the new situation. She told me her glasses were a little blurry too, but I could tell she was just saying that to make me feel better. She didn't hate her new glasses. In fact, she was treating the whole thing as if it were perfectly normal and straightforward. Now I was convinced there was something wrong with me, or they had really screwed up my glasses, or something. Why wasn't her experience like mine?

Lesson #7 is: You can only do your own *teshuvah*, and comparing yourself to others will just make you crazy.

This is a hard one to learn. It's so easy to defeat ourselves by looking at the progress of others. Of course, their life history is entirely different from ours, and we don't really know what's going on inside of them, or how much work they've done for how many years before this. All I know is, I'm still yelling at other drivers from the safety of my car, and this person is smiling like the Buddha while someone cuts in front of her in the grocery line. I'm feeling pretty good about changing over all the lights in my house to CFL bulbs, and this person tells me she's ripped out all her appliances and is now eating only raw, locally grown food and wearing clothes she makes herself. I'm proud of myself for giving a few more dollars away to *tzedakah*, and this person tells me he's just quit his job so he can volunteer full-time with refugees in Afghanistan.

Comparing mind doesn't really help us on our path, and in fact, it often gets in the way. If I can't be the patron saint of patience, then why bother calming myself in this moment? If I'm not ready to give it all up the way this other person did, then what difference does it make if I give away 10% of my income? This kind of thinking defeats us before we start. We are where we are, and can only make the change we're capable of making right now. That doesn't mean it's bad to have high ideals, or to look to others for inspiration. But if we use the progress of others as an excuse to give up on our own intentions, then we're doomed before we begin.

So, as we embark on these Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, my wish for all of us is that whatever changes we need to make in the new year, and however initially unsettled or blurry we feel in the process, may our *teshuvah* help us gain the clarity and insight we need. May we persevere through the moments of instability and lack of focus. May our turning be for the good, and may we all enjoy abundance and blessing in 5769. *L'shanah tovah!*

Rabbi Toba Spitzer