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ASBI Congregation
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“Why Courage Matters”

In 1970, David Ifshin was president of the National Student Association and an activist in the movement to end United States involvement in the Vietnam War. In one of the most controversial and extreme actions undertaken by opponents of the war, Ifshin was part of a delegation of American students and activist that traveled to Hanoi where they recorded radio broadcasts calling on American soldiers to abandon their posts and to refuse to carry out their orders. These broadcasts were shared by the North Vietnamese over the airwaves where they were heard by American soldiers and they were broadcast in prisons where captured American soldiers were kept confined and subjected to torture.

This was the context in which John McCain, already several years into an eventual five-year captivity as a POW in Hanoi, first heard the voice of David Ifshin. One can only imagine the degree of anger and resentment and even hatred someone in McCain’s situation would feel, confined in prison and subjected to brutal torture, at hearing the voice of a privileged American college student calling on American military personal to abandon their missions.

Eventually, as everyone does when subjected to torture, McCain too signed a “confession of criminality” in which he agreed that his involvement in the war was a criminal act. This did not gain him early freedom, but it did fill him with shame. This shame, combined with the unimaginable suffering of prison, lead McCain to attempt suicide. In the aftermath of the suicide attempt, McCain was able to forgive himself and he did so with a realization that the pressures of war had lead him to say something shameful by signing the “confession of criminality” and so he would never question anyone else’s statements about the war. The pressures were too great, the politics was too toxic, and the only way to forgive himself would be to forgive others.

David Ifshin ended up moving to a kibbutz in Israel for a year and when he returned to America and became involved in politics again, it was a much more conventional form of politics. Ifshin served in a senior role in Walter Mondale’s 1984 presidential campaign and it was in that context that he and McCain crossed paths. In 1984 McCain was a first-term congressman and, eager to please President Reagan, he delivered a speech denouncing Ifshin for his delegation to Hanoi during the Vietnam War.

The two men didn’t meet until a year later at an AIPAC event in Washington. McCain approached Ifshin, extended his hand, and apologized to Ifshin for the speech that attacked him. Ifshin was quite surprised by this overture but then in turn apologized for his own wartime activity.

The two men continued to advance in their careers. Ifshin became a part of the leadership team of AIPAC and had a senior role in the Clinton administration. When he accompanied President Clinton a Memorial Day service at the Vietnam Memorial protesters objected to his presence there given his extreme activism during the war. John McCain, by then a senator, delivered a speech on the floor of the senate, defending the honor and decency of his friend David Ifshin.

Ifshin died, at a young age, three years later and Senator McCain was one of his eulogizers. The two men had come to recognize the essential decency in each other and had learned that good people can make bad decisions, and that the greatest act of decency, is to muster the courage to reach out to an old adversary and turn that person into a friend.

This week’s Torah portion, reach each year before Rosh Hashanah, discusses the “great repentance” of the Jewish people, our return to God, and God’s return of us to our land. Teshuvah, repentance, as a recently published collection of essays by my teacher Rav Aaron Lichtenstein, emphasizes can mean “moral teshuvah” in which we repent or our sins, and “religious teshuvah” in which we repair and rebuild a newly intimate

relationship with God. Both aspects of teshuvah are indispensable. Each one is indispensable to the other, and each one requires courage.

לא בשמים, הוא: לאמר, מי יעלה-לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו, וישמענו אתה, ונעשנה.

The capacity for repentance is not in Heaven such that we would need to ask “who will ascend to Heaven to bring it down to us.”

ולא-מעבר לים, הוא: לאמר, מי יעבר-לנו אל-עבר הים ויקחה לנו, וישמענו אתה, ונעשנה
Nor is it across the sea such that we would need to ask “who will cross the seas and bring it back for us so that we may engage in repentance.”

But isn't it telling, that the Torah describes the mitzvah of teshuvah as one that we might think is beyond our capacity. Is there any other mitzvah about which the Torah explicitly names our reservations and fears and reassures us that we will be able to nonetheless perform the mitzvah? I can think of one example. Shemithah. And we can discuss that on another occasion. It is very rare for the Torah to provide this level of encouragement and reassurance about any particular mitzvah. In fact, some understand these verses to be describing the Torah in total rather than the mitzvah of teshuvah, but in context, it seems clear that the subject of these verses, the thing that is “not in heaven” and “not beyond the seas” is the mitzvah of teshuvah.

We've recited in Psalm 27 this month:

קוה אלה תזק ויאמץ לבך וקוה אלה:

Which calls for courage and fortitude among those seeking God.

Changing ourselves is the hardest thing there is that a person might attempt. Repairing relationships takes more courage than most other things that the Torah calls upon us to do. And this is true as well for our relationship with God.

Earlier in this morning's Torah portion, we are told that the teshuvah process is meant to lead us back to God.

ושבת עד-ה אלהיך, ושמעת בקולו, ככל אשר-אנכי מצוך, היום: אתה ובניך, בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך.

“And you shall return to the Lord your God and listen to God's voice in all the ways that I command you today; you and your children with all of your heart and soul.”

The Netivot Shalom, a popular collection of essays on the Torah composed by the Hassidic Rebbe of Slonim, who died in Yerushalayim just over 18 years ago, explains that our teshuvah is meant to take us עד-ה which means that it is not merely about restoring the status quo ante following some breach or division. It is about returning to a place of intimacy and closeness and connection we might never have experienced before.

Many of us have been gathering on Shabbat afternoon to study and contemplate Rambam's Hilkhot Teshvuah, Maimonides' magisterial treatise on teshuvah and its methods and meaning. (And newcomers are very welcome to join us, even now, Rabbanit Sarna is teaching this afternoon beginning at Chapter 4).

It is clear that teshuvah is a mitzvah that is incumbent on every Jew. The pernicious dichotomy in our common language between someone who may be called a “baal teshuvah” and another Jew labeled “frum from brith” cannot withstand scrutiny. Each one of us has an obligation to become a baal teshuvah, to repair

our relationships, to constantly improve our character and actions, and to strive for the sort of intimacy with God that is evoked by the Torah's language of **ח-טו**.

Teshuvah is not about accounting. It's not a metaphysical carwash. Teshuvah is recreating ourselves, transforming our relationships, and mustering the courage to live our lives in a dramatically different way than we have ever done before. God is calling us to intimacy and closeness. We need only the courage to take the first step. Shannah Tovah.