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Proof of Concept

I have an annual change in diet between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. The asseret yamei teshuvah, the ten days of repentance, for me, are ten days to wean myself off caffeine before Yom Kippur.

The Shulchan Arukh also recommends that we change our diets next week:

אנו משאירים נובזר פصحف של שבעה ימי תשובה זריז

Even one who normally is not careful to only eat bread baked by someone Jewish, (the highest standard of kashrut and a standard that most of us do not maintain), should do so during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, adds a seemingly unrelated comment:

…”More so, for the sin which a person knows about they have more need to admit, than for sin which a person does not know about…”

The connection between the words of the Shulchan Arukh, written in sixteenth century Tzfat, and the gloss of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, written just a few years later in Krakow is clear yet raises questions. Adopting a higher standard of kashrut for ten days is indeed consistent with the effort to examine one’s actions and one’s conduct and to commit to doing better even in doubtful circumstances. But, there is still something odd about taking on a pious practice for just ten days. What impact can this fleeting dietary change have on the course of my life? Are we fooling God when we eat extra-kosher bread for just one week?

Rabbi Benny Lau, an Israeli educator, public intellectual, and recently-retired congregational rabbi, wrote this past week about this phenomenon and shared his own initial skepticism of this practice. If it is important to maintain a higher standard of kashrut, then do it for the entire year, and if it isn’t important, then why take on that practice for these ten days. It comes off as being phony and insincere to take on somebody else’s extra-pious practices and to do so for only ten days.

But, upon reflection, and seeing a friend successfully use the asseret yamei teshuvah, the ten days of repentance, in productive yet temporary exercises of religious growth, Rabbi Lau changed his mind. A friend of his decided to adopt an entirely vegan diet for the asseret yamei teshuvah. She does not feel ready to take that on as a permanent ethical standard for herself and her family, but by taking on that practice as a standard for asseret yamei teshuvah, she honors her own ethical intuitions and reminds herself that she can still change her actions and ways of interacting with the world.

Rabbi Lau suggests other practices that we could adopt for asseret yemei teshuvah. Could we eliminate the use of disposable cutlery? Could we commit to not exceeding the speed limit when we drive? Could we insist on praying with a tzibbur three times a day, or even once each day, for just ten days of the year?
Rabbi Lau suggests that we can all benefit from just a bit of aspirational piety. If we prove to ourselves that we can act in just a slightly more conscientious way, even for a short period of time, we have demonstrated “proof of concept.” We know we can change and more ambitious and long-lasting changes can then be added to our spiritual agendas.

Our personalities are built over the course of a lifetime, stage after stage. Our relationship with God, and God’s Torah and the mitzvot of the Torah, are built layer upon layer. Those layers and stages are constructed by our teachers and parents and friends. And layers are added one on top of another by our experiences. Those experiences can be momentous events like marriage or the death of a parent. Those experiences can be have long durations like going off to college or learning in yeshiva for a year. Or, those experiences can be fleeting - a chance encounter with a new friend who provides just the support we need at an otherwise bleak moment.

Those experiences can also be contrived for our own benefit as part of a deliberate strategy to learn and grow and I believe this is what the Shulhan Arukh was suggesting when he recommended we eat only “extra kosher” bread between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur.

This is all in my mind his year when I encounter the words of the Torah portion this morning:

And you shall return - unto - the Lord your God.

Teshuvah is not just about erasing the mistakes of the past. Teshuvah is about creating intimacy with God - we keep on going, we keep forming our identities, adding new layers, new perspectives, new insights from the great theorists of Judaism from centuries past, and from our teachers and family and friends, and in this way we come close to God.

For Rambam, Maimonides, we do this by carefully and meticulously categorizing and evaluating our actions and our very character itself so that our souls are refined and ordered and turned into highly tuned tools for encountering God.

For Rav Kook, we do this by listening to, and allowing ourselves to follow, the innate urge of all creation and all creatures to return to, and to unite with, their Creator.

For Rav Soloveitchik, we do this by imitating God’s own pinnacle moment of creation, the creation of a human being, when we engage in the teshuvah process and create ourselves anew.

And after studying their words and opinions we add additional layers from the influence of teachers and relatives and friends. We add the memories of our saddest moments and our greatest joys.

Small actions, when combined with other influences and experiences can end up transforming who we are. A commitment does not have to be momentous and it does not have to be forever. Can you refrain from eating any food cooked in a non-kosher kitchen until after Yom Kippur? Can you wear a kippah as you walk the streets of Lakeview for just ten days? Can you set one extra seat at your table this holiday season for a guest referred to you by the Hospitality Committee? Small actions, when combined with other influences and experiences can end up transforming who we are.

One of the central orienting ideas of Kabbalah and the Jewish mystical tradition is that nothing pure and holy can ever be associated with anything, however briefly, without leaving behind a residue of its presence. The
commitments we made last year and never kept still leave an impression on us. The teachers of years ago and family patriarchs and matriarchs who have been dead for decades still leave an impression on us. The pious practices we take on for ten days, leave an impression on our souls that last forever.

We are days away from Rosh Hashannah and the opportunity of the Asseret Yamei Teshuvah. I encourage each one of us to find ways to prove to ourselves, through small symbolic acts of piety and conscientious ethical choices, that we retain the capacity to shift the direction of our lives and pivot towards greater intimacy with Torah and Mitzvot and the Giver of Torah and Mitzvot.

When we mine the riches of Jewish tradition, when we are open to the guidance of teachers, when relatives and friends inspire us, we build and develop our own unique selves. This is the perfect time of year for building up our unique identities and then deploying all of our strengths and qualities to the task of teshuvah. I wish us all the strength and courage to repair the relationships that need fixing, to learn the lessons we need to learn, and to emerge from this season ready to face the new year as our best selves.