

The Power to Change Shabbat Shuvah 5782

Several years ago, I was asked to meet with a young woman, the neighbor of a Beth Am member, who was interested in learning more about Judaism. I happily reached out to set up a time to chat. It turned out that she had a chronic illness that kept her mostly homebound, so we met a few times on Skype and I recommended books for her to read. She was smart and thoughtful and eager to learn. As time went on, her illness progressed until she was basically bedridden. Then she asked me to come visit her. I remember seeing her in her room, lying on her bed, a small fridge next to it. Her whole life was contained in that one room. Like all typical millennials, she stayed engaged with the world through her phone and computer, but unlike her peers, it was out of necessity. We talked about one of the books I had recommended, “Everyday Holiness” by Alan Morinis. It’s a book about musar, the Jewish practice of character development, and the young woman was really taken by it. She told me that she was looking for ways to find purpose in her life and found the practices Morinis recommends to be very meaningful. I was so moved by her enthusiasm for the book. The unfairness of being such a young, bright person and having such a limited life would have made the best of us bitter and depressed. And I’m sure she had her moments. But here she was, trying to live a meaningful life by

turning inward, looking at herself and asking, how can I be better, kinder, more patient, more humble? Even from this bed?

I was thinking about that young woman this week because lately, every day, I wake up and read the news and feel powerless. So much is out of our control. I can't make COVID go away, I can't put out wildfires, I can't rescue Afghan refugees, and I can't get rid of dangerous and cruel legislation. Now there are, of course, actions I can take to make some small difference towards solving all of these problems, but that's a sermon for another time. On this Shabbat Shuvah, I want to take a page from my young friend's book. I may be powerless in the face of the world's problems, but I am not powerless when it comes to fixing me.

This reminder that we have the power to change is the great gift of these Days of Awe. As Maimonides warns us in his inimitable way, "Don't let it cross your mind that which fools of the nations of the world and a majority of unsophisticated members of the Jewish People say: that the Holy One decrees at the very creation of every human being whether he should be righteous or wicked. The matter is not so. Every person is capable of being as just as Moses our Teacher or as wicked as [King] Jeroboam, wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, and so in all other tendencies. No one forces things upon him or decrees things

against him; either to pull him one way or draw him another way, but he alone, of his own free will, with the consent of his mind, bends to any path he may desire to follow” (MT Teshuvah 5:2). The Rambam, writing in the 12th century, speaks to that very human tendency to blame our shortcomings on external forces. Don’t be tempted to think that way, he says. Our destinies are not predetermined -- it is our choices, our actions, that define who we are.

Our modern understanding of psychology and sociology might call the Rambam’s contention into question. We know that much of our personalities and our opportunities are affected by a combination of nature and nurture, of the genes we were born with and the circumstances we were born into. But within those constraints, the Rambam’s point still stands: we always have choices to make. Viktor Frankl makes the point about as well as any person could: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”¹

¹ *Man’s Search for Meaning*, pg. 86.

We are free to choose our own way, and we have all chosen the wrong one, in one way or another. That's why we're called to *t'shuvah*, to return to the right path. If we can choose to go down the wrong path, then we can choose to turn around and go the other way. As someone with very little sense of direction, this speaks to me on a number of levels. Our haftarah for this Shabbat, from the prophet Hosea, calls to us, "*Shuvah Yisrael, ad Adonai Eloheicha*. Return, O Israel, unto the Eternal your God, for you have fallen because of your sin" (Hos. 14:2). "You've gone the wrong way and it's turned out badly," says God. "Come back here and let's start again."

So how do we come back, especially if we've gone down that wrong path for a long while? Hosea continues, "Take words with you and return to the Eternal. Say to God: 'Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips.'" The first step is to turn, to change our minds, to resolve in our hearts to make different choices. And the next step is to speak words of confession and contrition. It's a humble offering and a humbling offering -- nothing flashy or expensive, just our honest, heartfelt words. "Forgive us. See the good in us." It sounds simple, but it's enough. For God responds, "I will heal their backsliding, generously I will take them back in love." Once we turn back towards the good, once

we speak the words of confession and intention to do better, then comes the hard part -- then we have to change. But at least we know we have the power to do so.

My favorite teaching on repentance comes from the midrash Pesikta Rabbati:

A king's son was far away from his father, a hundred days' journey. His friends said to him, "Go back to your father's house." He said to them, "I can't." So his father sent him a message, saying, "Go as far as your strength will allow, and I will come the rest of the way to you" (Pesikta Rabbati 44).

During these days of repentance, we are only asked to walk as far as our strength allows, to change what is within our power to change. So let's start walking.