

Teshuvah: Retuning and Returning in the New Year  
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It's said that Reb Levi Yitzchak was the most impassioned prayer leader of his time. He could hardly control himself. When Levi Yitzchak would pray, he would start on one side of the room.... and wind up, on the other. When he led the Kiddush, his students would have to wear raincoats because he would wave the glass of wine all around when he chanted. Reb Levi Yitzchak loved God. Reb Baruch was the opposite, ....controlled, precise in every way. When he prayed, his lips would barely move. His students sat in silence. Reb Baruch was in awe of God.

Once, Reb Levi Yitzchak sent a message to Reb Baruch asking if he could visit. Reb Baruch sent back a message, refusing. He said to Levi Yitzchak, "Your way and mine are totally opposite. You'll disrupt everything I do here." Levi Yitzchak sent back another note. "I promise to control myself the whole time. I'll do everything your way. I won't lead any *davvening* or make *Kiddush*. I'll just say, 'amen' when you make the blessings." Reb Baruch agreed to a visit, the following Shabbat afternoon, for prayers and a Shabbat meal.

Reb Levi Yitzchak arrived early Shabbat afternoon. Everyone was seated around Reb Baruch's table and Levi Yitzchak took a moment to notice Reb Baruch's beautiful, sparkling, white tallit. The prayers began. Levi Yitzchak was quite well behaved. Reb Baruch's students kept waiting for Levi Yitzchak to break out in wild devotion. He didn't. They kept waiting for his famous raincoat drenching Kiddush. Nothing. Levi Yitzchak only said, "Amen", after the blessings, just like he promised. Then came the

meal. On the serving platter were two kinds of fish, and the server came by to ask the guests which kind of fish they wanted. The server came to Levi Yitzchak. “Which kind of fish do you love?” That’s all he had to say. “Which kind of fish do I love? I don’t love fish. I love God!! Jaws dropped, and almost in slow motion, the whole room saw that piece of fish flying through the air, only to land “plop”, right on Reb Baruch’s beautiful, sparkling, white tallit. The students were shocked. What would Reb Baruch do?

*Shanah Tovah.* This story is going to tell us some important things about beginning the New Year. And, as you can imagine, there are many ways to begin this year. One of the spiritual questions, maybe even the question for these next 10 days is, “How will you approach, *Hashanah*, this year. How will you approach this year?”

We get some clues about how to approach the year from the language, itself. In Hebrew, every verb usually has a three-letter root, and, the beauty of the language is that words related to one another often have the same root. For example, the word for book, *sefer*, scribe, *sofer*, and library, *sefriah*, all have the same root letters: *samech*, *phe*, and *resh*. You can hear that the words are related both in meaning and linguistically. In English, the words, “book”, “scribe”, and “library”, are only related because of their meaning and don’t have anything else in common. Here’s how the language helps us to know how to approach this year.

Rosh Hashanah is usually translated as head of the year. *Rosh* means head, *ha* means the or this, and *shanah* (the noun) means year. Head of the year or beginning of the year. The word *shanah* can also be a verb and, as a verb, it has a number of meanings. First, *shanah*, can mean to repeat, go over, something. On the one hand, its

good to go over things in your head to figure out how to do them better. What a great way to approach the year. To go over, in your head, what you did well this past year, and to identify what you could do better. The limitation of this approach is that you could go over, and over, and over the same thing in your head to try to get it just right. This is like having a kind of spiritual obsessive-compulsive disorder. I know this approach, having gone over, and over, and over these very words.

*Shanah* can also mean to study, learn, or teach. This, too, can be a good way to approach the year. Each of us could study and learn something new and maybe even teach it to others. How wonderful would it be if we all studied and learned how to get along better with each other, both in our families, jobs, communities and maybe even the world. On the other hand, sometimes too much study and learning can take us away from our families and friends, which can be hurtful to them and us as well. I know this experience, too, having studied intensively for the past three years.

Then, there's, *shinah* from the same root, which means, "change" – to change something or someone. On the one hand, to change something in yourself is part of the work of this season. On the other hand, trying to change someone else is almost always a slippery slope. Recently, a man came to my office and said, "Well, Doc., here's the problem. Every time I talk to my 17 - year old son, he gets up and walks out of the room. Then he said to me, "Can we change him?" It's so natural to want the other person to change. This season, we don't look to change the other. We look inward – what can I do? How can I change?

Since the word *shanah* can also mean change, Rosh Hashanah can mean, *rosh*, "head" and *shanah*, "change" - a head change. A head change or a changing of the head.

This is the season for us to change our heads. And of course you know, it doesn't mean coming to services with just a new hairstyle.

Here's another way to approach the year. The phrase *shinah et hakivnun*. It means to change the tuning or to retune. *Shinah* – “change”, and *hakivnun* from the same root as *kavanah*, which means, “intention” or “direction.” To change the tuning, or retune yourself. I love this image. First of all, I'm constantly retuning my guitar in services. I tune it. I bring it Marty. She says, “Bring this string up, and that string down.” I retune it. Then we both go to Leslie and Leslie says, “No, bring this string down and that string up.” I retune it a second time. Now, if all we have to do in this New Year is retune our musical instruments, our work is easy. However, if we are the musical instruments, retuning ourselves gets more complicated. Where do we start? How do we do it? What if I think I'm in tune and someone close to me thinks I need retuning? How do I retune myself so I can be more in tune with myself and in tune with others?

Twenty years ago, almost to the day. October 14, 1985. It's game 5 of the National league Championship Series between the Cardinals the Dodgers. Bottom of the ninth inning. Ozzie Smith was batting. Remember Jack Buck's now famous call. “Smith corks one into right, down the line, it may go. ... Go crazy, folks, go crazy.” Now, “Go Crazy, folks” is a curious directive coming from a psychologist. Believe it or not, this is yet another way to approach the year. *Shinah et taamoh*. Literally to change one's taste. It means to change one's mind or to temporarily act a little crazy. On the one hand, letting off some steam as a way to let go of the pressures of a tough week can be a relief. But, as a way to approach the year? I don't know. Maybe that's why we have Shabbat.

How about sleeping through the year? That's possible. The same letters that spell the word, "change", also spell the word *shenah*, which means sleep. You could approach the year by sleeping through the year, or, as a *rosh hashenah* a sleepy head; one who might not pay much attention to what's happening. Like the psychologist and the lawyer who meet in the elevator. The lawyer asks, "How do you listen to all those problems, all day long?" The psychologist responds, "Who listens?" While I'm all for getting enough sleep, Rosh Hashanah is a kind of spiritual a wake up call for the year. The sound of the Shofar, that we will hear tomorrow morning calls us to awaken to the New Year so we can respond in a new way.

There is one other way to approach the New Year. The word, *Hishtanah*, also means, "to change." You may recognize the sound of this word from the Passover seder - *ma nishtanah halailah hazeh, mikol haleilot*. "How is this night changed or different from all other nights?" *Hishtanah* is in the reflexive form in the Hebrew, which means we do this thing to ourselves. How great is this? *Hishtanah*. To change oneself. And I think this integrates the best of all the other ways to approach the year. *Hishtanah* includes the repetitions necessary to get something right without becoming obsessive. It includes, study, learning and teaching something new without getting lost in it. It includes changing our heads for the better without changing the other person. It includes retuning ourselves to be more in tune with others. And it even includes going a little crazy at times, and getting enough sleep so we can be awake and present to what's important. *Hishtanah* – changing oneself, includes it all.

So where do we start to change ourselves? We start with the age-old question, “How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?” The rabbis have been pondering this question for centuries. “How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer is, “One, but, the light bulb has to want to change.” The light bulb has to want to change. On Rosh Hashanah, we start to change ourselves with wanting to change ourselves. This is something that comes from deep inside every person. Each of us has to decide that we want to change in some way for the good in this New Year.

Once you decide you want to change you begin the process of teshuvah. In the service tomorrow morning we will say, On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur, it is sealed. “Who shall live, and who shall die. Who shall see ripe age and who shall not”, and so on. What are we saying in that moment? The prayer suggests that God judges our deeds of the past year and determines if we will live another year or not. Hence the prayer, ”Remember us for life and inscribe us for blessing in the Book of Life for another year.” Some believe this in the most literal way. More liberal Jews, however, might see the judgment as a kind of yearly spiritual performance appraisal. How did we all do this past year? Are we being as kind and as loving to each other as we can be? Are we being responsible in taking care of ourselves, each other, and the earth? When we’ve hurt each other, have we worked to make amends and to change what was hurtful? In general, have we been our best and highest spiritual selves? If you believe as I do that we are co –creators with God, you can maximize your chances for being written into the Book of Life for this coming year by doing three things: *T’shuvah, Tefillah Tzedakah* .

That's why it says at the end of this prayer, "*u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma a vireen, et roah ha gezerah*. But *teshuvah, tefillah* and *tzedakah* can temper or avert God's possible severe judgment." *Tefillah*, or prayer is covered by your participation in these services. *Tzedakah*, often translated as charity, is covered by your generous contributions to such things as the Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane "Rita relief funds and other charities of your choosing; volunteering your time, energy; making chicken soup to heal body and soul, hammering nails to help build a home for those in need.

The *Teshuvah* part is the most challenging. *Teshuvah* is often translated as repentance. Literally it means returning. But returning to what. Returning to your highest and best self, which is a returning to God. This is where the spiritual work is for these High Holy Days. It's the work of *teshuvah*. And the good news is that when you do *teshuvah*, you're not really going towards something totally new even when you make specific behavioral changes. You're actually coming home to your highest and best spiritual self and, in doing so, you come back to God.

So, how do you do *teshuvah*? You do a *cheshbon ha nefesh* - an inventory of the soul. The term *cheshbon ha nefesh* was first described by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin in 1812 in Lvov, Ukraine. Rabbi Leffin describes a systematic method of self-understanding, complete with practice exercises that take about a year. This is well described in Alan Morinis's book on Mussar practice called Climbing Jacob's Ladder. *Cheshbon hanefesh* has, in more recent times, come to describe the inner soul searching that one begins in the month of *Elul*, the month that proceeds Rosh Hashanah. Don't worry if you haven't started yet. You have ten days from now till the end of Yom Kippur to do this work.

Here's how you can do the inventory of the soul. Spend a few minutes by yourself. Close your eyes and be quiet. Ask yourself, "Where do I get tripped up in my life? What's the thing do I keep doing that gets me in trouble?" Give yourself time to think about this. "What kinds of things keep happening to me over and over?" Remember, If you keep having the same experiences that you don't like, it's not the other guy. It's at least partly you. A big part you. Maybe you don't tell the truth and your lying catches up with you. Maybe you have difficulty controlling your anger. Maybe you're arrogant and need to work on your humility. Maybe you have trouble with silence, faith, or feeling generous toward others. Maybe you gossip. Maybe it's not being able to forgive, or not giving someone the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it's difficult for you to feel and express your gratitude. Decide one thing you want to change about yourself in this New Year. If you can't find one thing to change, ask a good friend or colleague for help. What do you see that I could change about myself in this New Year? Ask it seriously. And if you're asked, respond truthfully and with a loving heart. "I think you could drink less alcohol in the New Year." Once you know what you're going to change, practice it every day. Start your day with it. "Today, I'm going to be aware of my gratitude. I'm going to appreciate someone or something today." Make it an intention for yourself. At the end of the day, check in with yourself about it. How did I do today with feeling more trusting, or feeling more patient - whatever the quality is you're working on. Practice it every day for month. After a month it will be more a part of you. This program really does work.

I'm suggesting that between now and Yom Kippur, you take this inventory of the soul identify a quality or behavior that you want to work on and begin to work on it. I

have a second thing to suggest as a kind of spiritual homework. First, we have to return to our story.

Remember Reb Levi Yitzchak, who **loves God** and that piece of fish that landed plop on Reb Baruch's beautiful, sparkling white tallit? Everyone in the room was shocked and everyone in the room got quiet. What would Reb Baruch do? Would there be words? An argument? A fight? His students rushed to him to wipe off the stains. Reb Baruch stopped them. "These stains are holy", he said, "Because they were made by someone who loves only God. How can I wipe them off?" It's said, he never did.

How wonderful it would be, if everyone we hurt would respond as Reb Baruch did. Or, would it be that wonderful? On the one hand, it could be very healing if the people we've hurt come forward, on their own, and forgive us. On the other hand, in doing so, it may rob us of the possibility of doing *teshuvah*. And we know of the healing power of being able to go to the other, to apologize, and to make amends. Reb Levi Yitzchak, though seemingly forgiven, didn't have the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to go to Reb Baruch to say he was sorry and to make amends. During this period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it's our work to go to people we've hurt during the year, acknowledge how we've hurt them, apologize and make amends, and work to change the hurtful behavior. Then on Yom Kippur we come before God and ask for God's forgiveness.

The second part of the homework is this. Each of us has stained somebody's tallit in the past year. Each of us has hurt others. Think about what you've done. Go to the people in your life that you've hurt. Tell them how you've "stained" them, how you've

hurt them, in this past year. If you're sorry, say you're sorry and say what you're going to do differently this year. Don't forget to ask if the person can work toward forgiveness.

My hope is for all of us to take an inventory of the soul, find something that's important for us to change, and work to change it in this New Year. I further hope that we go to the people we've hurt during the past year, apologize and make amends, and work to change those behaviors as well. That's the *teshuvah* – **the retuning**, and **the returning**, to your highest and best, spiritual self, and to God. When one of us does it, the world shifts just a little. When all of us do it, the world shifts even more. *Hishtanah-* we change ourselves, and the whole world changes. And then, everything is a little more hopeful, a little more joyous, and a little more in tune. May it be so, for all of us, in this New Year. *K'en y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.

