

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO TESHUVAH

Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5770

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Return again,
Return again,
Return to the land of your soul.*

(repeat stanza)

*Return to who you are,
Return to what you are,
Return to where you are - born and reborn again.*

(repeat chorus)

The Baal Shem Tov or Besht, as he is called for short, used to tell this story right before the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah:

Once there was a great king with magical powers. With his magic he created an illusion - a hologram of sorts, that gave the appearance of a mighty palace fortress with high walls, large locked gates and a series of moats surrounding him. Then he invited his subjects to come visit him in the palace. The people came from far and wide, delighted that the king had invited them. When they approached the imposing walls of the palace, with its locked gates and elaborate moats, seeing no way to enter, they were dejected, because they had struggled so hard to get there and now entrance seemed impossible. So they turned back and returned from whence they came. Only one subject - the king's son - figured out that the obstacles before him were just an illusion. Taking a breath, he walked forward into the walls and found himself standing before his father, who embraced him.

The story follows a paradigm often used by the sages of the Talmud and by the Baal Shem Tov as well, in which God is portrayed as the King, humanity as his subjects, and the people of Israel as the King's beloved son. So too, here, the King is God. The subjects are all humanity yearning to draw close to God, to live holy lives infused with God's spirit and guided by God's will, lives that link us to God and enable us to feel God's presence in our lives in a tangible way, to find comfort and inspiration, guidance and strength, and most of all a sense of peace and harmony with God, with ourselves and with our world. But like the King's subjects in the Besht's story, too often we face obstacles in

our path, barriers that seem to block our way to God, and like the subjects in the Besht's story, we turn back. We give up. We stop trying. We retreat to who we are rather than continue to strive toward who we could become. We allow those obstacles to block our way to God.

The message of the story is that those obstacles, those barriers are surmountable. The Baal Shem Tov is urging us to look beyond them, to move past them, to see - as the King's son saw - that in reality nothing stands in the way of our achieving a life of holiness, nothing stands between us and God.

The problem - the Besht knew, as we know - is that returning is not so easy. Every time we seek to return, we run up against those fortress walls that seem to stand in our way, barriers that prevent us from doing what we know we should do, being who we know we should be, barriers that separate us from God, from Torah, from people we love, from our world, and from our truest selves.

Every year at Rosh Hashanah we start out with an ambitious set of goals. We say: This year, I'm going to treat my family and friends better. This year, I am going to be a better listener. This year, I am going to spend more time with my spouse and my children. I am going to gossip less, be more forgiving, more honest, more compassionate, less jealous... I will give more tzedakah, attend daily minyan, hang mezuzahs on every doorway in my house, make time to study Torah, get more involved in the synagogue

Its a great list. The only thing is... it sounds a lot like last year's list. And it probably sounds a lot like next year's list. Every year it speaks straight to our heart because no matter how sincere we are when the year begins, no matter how hard we try to return, we end up right back here, making the same mistakes over and over again. Why? Because we come up against those fortress walls - those barriers, which unlike the King's walls are not illusory - they are real. But what is illusory is the conviction that we cannot do anything about them. The illusion is that we are stuck with who we are, that we cannot do real teshuvah. And caught up in that illusion, we turn back to our old ways.

Yet the reality is that though the barriers to teshuvah can be daunting, we can push right past them. And on the other side of those barriers, God is waiting to receive us, like an anxious parent waiting for His wayward child to come home. Lovingly He calls out to us:

*Return again,
Return again,
Return to the land of your soul.*

(repeat stanza)

*Return to who you are,
Return to what you are,
Return to where you are born and reborn again.*

(repeat stanza)

One of the greatest barriers to teshuvah is that we try to change too much at the same time. It is a little intimidating to think about all the changes we have to make. We tend to become overwhelmed and to give up.

Yet imperfection is human. Did you know that when the Amish make those beautiful quilts, they have a tradition that the quilter deliberately puts some flaw into the design of the quilt, as an artistic representation of an important theological truth: things human beings do are never perfect. Perfection only belongs to God. Don't try to be God.

Our sages wisely taught *tafasta merubah lo tafasta* - if you try to grasp too much, you end up not grasping anything at all. So do not try to change everything in one year. Instead, choose a few key areas in which to focus your efforts to change. Start with just one serious ethical mitzvah and one major ritual mitzvah and make that your focus for the coming year. Maybe your ethical *teshuvah* is controlling anger, or giving *tzedakah* more generously. Maybe your ritual *teshuvah* is keeping kosher, or coming to services every Sabbath. God embraces us for every individual change we make, and the rabbis taught: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* - each mitzvah makes the next one easier.

A second barrier to *teshuvah* is the experience of failure. Its no secret to this congregation that I have a problem with my weight, and you have been with me through all my ups and downs so to speak. Anyone who has struggled with their weight knows what its like to lose weight only to start regaining it. Each time you begin a diet again it gets harder, because you have lost confidence in your ability to succeed. Worse, you fear how others will judge you if you fail, and you anticipate embarrassment. This is not just true about the struggle to lose weight. It is just as true of every aspect of your life that you would really like to change or improve.

But think of that failure as a tool to help you succeed. The rabbis taught that someone who has never sinned cannot even merit to stand in the place of one who has sinned and repented. Only knowing the power of temptation and the reality of failure prepares us to struggle successfully to improve. When we make the decision to move forward despite our slips, we begin to see our true selves within us, right through that wall, and that makes it easier to return.

A third barrier is that we are overly concerned with what others think of us, and not concerned enough about what God thinks of us. We fear asking forgiveness or admitting a mistake because it makes us feel vulnerable. We are afraid that revealing our flaws will chase away those we love and respect, that we will be judged as a whole person only by our mistakes, or worse, that someone malicious will use our failures to harm us in some way. Yet we fail to see that the only real damage we incur we already inflicted on ourselves by our sins. And the only way to heal those damaged relationships and to regain our reputations is to acknowledge what they already know, and show that we care enough to want to do something about it. There is no greater demonstration of our love for another person or for God then to set right that which was done wrong.

We also have the opposite concern: If we really do teshuvah, what will others think of us? If I try to learn more Judaism, will I be able to keep up? and if I decide to start taking Jewish observance more seriously, to do more, will that be strange for people around me? Will I be embarrassed? Will I be able to do it? What if I do it wrong? Will I perform some terrible sacrilege? Will I be criticized? If I start adding one mitzvah and am not doing another, will people think I am a hypocrite? If I do too much will people look at me differently?

The reality is that most of the time others will barely take note. I am often asked if I am uncomfortable walking down the street in my *kipah*. Wearing my *kipah* is deeply meaningful for me. It reminds me that I always stand in God's presence, that I should cultivate humility and be aware of my actions, and it is an expression of my Jewish pride. Yet the truth is most people do not even pay attention to my *kipah*. I am more aware of it than they are. When people do ask about it, it is invariably with a sense of admiration.

As for keeping up, with a moderate amount of time and effort, we can expand our knowledge of our tradition dramatically. The more we learn, the more knowledgeable and comfortable we become with our tradition, the more we feel motivated by our learning to increase our observance and our *middot* - our values and our character. As the rabbis taught: *gadol ha-limud she-meyvi l'ma'aseh* - great is learning for it leads to deeds.

At age 45, Dr. Randy Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Early on, he agreed to speak in a lecture series at Carnegie Mellon University entitled "the Last Lecture," in which professors would try to sum up their personal and professional wisdom as if it truly was their last lecture they would ever give. At the time he agreed he could not have known that this really was going to be his last lecture. He spoke about his illness and about how he viewed his life - however short - as a success, because he had fulfilled his dreams in whole or in part.

He had much advice for his students, but perhaps the most important was this: In life we encounter many brick walls that seem to come between us and our goals. But these brick walls are only illusions. They are in place not to keep us out, but to let us show how much we want something, to make the quest more challenging and to make us value the goal more highly.

Dr. Pausch spoke from experience. He had faced some pretty tough brick walls. Yet he was determined not to let that stop him from living fully and joyously. Each time he faced a brick wall he took a breath and refused to accept that the task was just not doable. He overcame the illusion of his powerlessness, just as we must overcome the illusion that teshuvah is impossible for us.

Those walls just made Randy appreciate that much more how important it was to him to make the most of his life, to be the best he could be, and to make the best difference he could in this world. Instead of seeing each wall as an obstacle, he saw it as a call, a call to return to his truest self.

Carnegie Mellon built a footbridge in Randy's memory. Based on his talk, the bridge was built in a way that those crossing perceive there is a brick wall ahead of them, and yet as they approach the other side they realize they can walk right through it.

What a beautiful representation of the Besht's understanding of the process of teshuvah. Perhaps Jews from around the world should be making pilgrimages to Pittsburgh before the High Holidays to walk the bridge and be reminded of Randy's - and the Baal Shem Tov's - lesson: those walls looming up in your life - the ones that seem to stand in the way of your spiritual journey - those walls may be real, but its just an illusion to feel they cannot be breached. Do not let them deter you, do not turn aside. They are an opportunity for you to prove how badly you want to be your best, how much you desire to be connected to the ones you love, to be connected to community, to be connected to the world, and to be feel connected to God.

God is waiting for you - waiting for you to return. All you have to do is try, and to be heartened by the words of the sages: God says to us, "You just open up the gates of repentance the width of the eye of a needle, and I will then pull them open so wide elephants and camels can pass through."

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**(Song, Return Again, by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, available on in many versions by various artists on Youtube, and on many CDs, including those by his daughter Neshama Carlebach)*