

Rosh Hashanah Day One 1 Tishri 5777/ 3 October 2016

Illuminate Within

Delivered by Rabbi David Novak, Israel Congregation of Manchester

Could it be that it was all so simple then?

Or has time rewritten every line?

And if we had the chance to do it over again,

tell me,

would we, could, we?

The lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

The music by Marvin Hamlisch.

From The Way We Were.

So simple, they encapsulate what we find seductive about our pasts:

The good old days

As better than today.

The good old days.

Days of wide finned automobiles with massive engines when the environment was a second thought;

School dances with friends, all lacking anxiety about midterms--and life;

Peaceful walks through your university campus with no concerns about paying off the debt you incurred to be there;

Happy marriages with a perfect spouse and extraordinary children . . . Like those stalwart parents of the television age June and Ward Cleaver or Ozzie and Harriet. . . as opposed to. . . the realities of marriage and family life.

Of course you also remember those halcyon days when people never got sick

and if they did, they bounced back immediately with just a little Jewish Penicillin?

And what did they call chicken soup before the discovery of Penicillin?

Good old days.

At least that's how so many of us like to think.

Sentimentality, nostalgia and romanticism of what has come before as being "better."

It is seductive to relive the past,

Especially as our minds conveniently erase challenges then.

One thing remains true, though:

We are the same people.

Or are we?

We are in that rarefied time of the Jewish year,

A time when we are given our annual opportunity to focus on ourselves and our choices.

We reflect on our past experiences,

from years ago until this moment.

We are given the time and space to consider how we choose to live our lives

And consider what works.

And doesn't work for us.

We are raising consciousness of our beings.

In so doing, we begin to contemplate what we would like to change.

Change is hard.

One only has to look at statistics for new year's resolutions that are made in January. People "resolve" to change long-held behaviors because the calendar is changing.

The top ten new year's resolutions for 2015 were:

Lose weight

Get organized

Spend less, save more

Stay fit and health

Learn something exciting

Quit smoking

Enjoy life to the fullest

Help others in their dreams

Fall in love

Spend more time with family

The first six resolutions are ones that are concrete; the last four about the quality of life.

All are aspirational.

Like me, I always wonder how well people fare in their new year's resolutions.

I learned that 75% of people will maintain their resolution through the first week of the new year.

By the second week, it drops to 71%.

After four weeks, only at the end of one month, the number dropped to 64%!

You can guess what the next statistic will be. By June, the number people successfully holding to their new year's resolution decreased to less than half: only 46%.

Change is hard.

By year's end, only 8% of the people found that they were successful in achieving their resolutions.

Now I know that many of us would describe ourselves as “good people.”

I know this to be true.

When you come together to comfort a mourner at a shiva house.

When you inquire and visit with congregants who are ill.

When you come together to celebrate in community.

When you push the Shabbat tables together on Friday night.

When you volunteer time and treasure at the Community Food Cupboard or the
Emergency Needs Fund

All acts of good.

These are not the changes I am suggesting.

Today, I want to shift the frame

Away from the model of a new year resolution,

Away from the idea of the “quick fix” which almost never work,

from external to internal,

from the world around us to the world within us,

From what only you can see

and only you can know.

An axiom of the human condition is

no matter how much we feel we stuck in our patterns,

change is always available.

During this opportunity of heightened introspection, each of us is asked to focus a
spotlight on our inner lives,

taking the time to reflect on what makes us who we are.

It is not easy.

If it was easy, we'd be doing it all the time.

What I am suggesting now, though, is asking yourself a series of questions where you assess your being. . .truly the translation of Tikkun ha Nefesh, a repair of your being.

Even though I am using the word "repair" I am not using it in the sense to suggest that any of us is "broken."

Rather, I use to think about the parts of you that only you know for which you would like to become more attentive.

The model for what I am inviting you to do is love, not punishment. Do not punish yourself for what you have done, especially if it has not hurt another person.

We are all human.

Love, that emotion that we all know, where no matter where you are in your relationship, you know that it will be sustained because love undergirds it.

This is also true of the love of God, for the God of Israel will always take you back in love, no matter what you find. No matter how you have experienced or imagined God in your lives, a truth of our God is that love is primary, not anger, not judgment.

If we are to act in God's ways, then, to make this self-examination successful, we must all practice self-love. Self-love.

We make thousands of decisions every day.

None of us is completely flawed.

There is no perfection.

Which is why this work requires a gentleness of approach.

You may choose to ask yourself:

In what ways am I taking care of myself?

Do I care for my body?

Do I go to a doctor on a regular basis?

Do I exercise?

Do I engage in habits that I know are bad for me but feel incapable of stopping?

How is my emotional state overall?

Do I understand that I don't have to feel the way I do?

Do I or have I ever seen a psychotherapist?

How do I eat? Too much? Not enough? The right foods? Do I punish myself for eating? Am I obsessed with body image?

Do I drink too much?

Do I have any known or unacknowledged addictions? Am I in recovery?

As I said, only a beginning. In the gentleness of approach, one cannot say I resolve to do x. When you see what is within, understand that change is gradual, a process of patience.

As you grow in self-understanding, you are planting the seeds for change.

Know that as long as you are alive you will have this opportunity.

Be honest with yourself.

Be gentle.

Be patient.

Be caring.

Be loving.

Know that in your humanity, in your relationship to self, to others, and to God,

You will always be a blessing because of who you are.