

## Teshuva is Returning – Sermon Rosh Hashana eve 5778 (2017)

Delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner

Singing:

Return again. Return again.  
Return to the land of your soul.  
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Return to who you are.  
Return to what you are.  
Return to where you are.  
Born and reborn again.

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This beautiful song calls us to one of the major tasks before us during this High Holy Day season. We are now entering the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, often translated as the 10 days of repentance, which begin with *Rosh Hashana* and continue through *Yom Kippur*. It's an opportunity to pause from our everyday concerns and activities, to step back, and reflect on our lives. Repentance requires that we examine our deeds, take note of our transgressions, and ask for forgiveness from those we have harmed, and from God.

There is a formula for this that is prescribed by our tradition. It's a *Mitzvah* to confess our sins, but that's just the beginning. We are instructed to confess our sins, seek forgiveness from those we have harmed, and finally to resolve not to make the same mistakes again. It's a simple formula - 1, 2, 3 and we are forgiven for our transgressions by a forgiving God, and hopefully by forgiving relatives, friends and neighbors whom we have harmed, intentionally or unintentionally.

Of course, it's not as easy as it sounds. Even the first step of admitting our mistakes takes courage. The next step of resolving to approach others for forgiveness takes great humility and emotional strength. Step three, however, may be the hardest of all - resolving not to make same mistakes again. Step three reminds me of the well-known ritual, during the secular new year, of making New Year's resolutions. One thing that I have observed year after year,

is the folly of New Year's resolutions. Habits, especially bad habits die hard. By definition habits are ingrained in our being. They are hard to change.

Now as some of you know, my wife Marcy and I are committed to exercise. You may have seen her running up and down the local hills. You may have seen me out on my bike, on Richville Road or River Road. Back in Minnesota, where we lived for 23 years and raised our family, there are sleek and popular health clubs called Lifetime Fitness. Marcy and I were among the regulars at Lifetime Fitness.

We came to know very well the club's busy times, and planned our visits accordingly, when competition for various equipment was low, making it a more pleasant time to visit the club. That strategy worked almost all year, but without fail, when January 1st came around, attendance at the club spiked to an all-time high. It became hard to find a free treadmill, or a free shower. I would complain to Marcy about the overcrowding, and make an even greater effort to visit the health club during off hours. The sudden crowds, of course, we're due to the phenomenon of New Year's resolutions. People resolved to finally get in shape, and individual visits spiked.

It's a wonderful thing that people we're committing to a healthier lifestyle, but you may not be surprised, within 30 days, health club attendance dropped back down to the usual levels. Those individuals who made their new Year's resolutions to exercise regularly, eventually dropped off the wagon. I'm sure most of those people were sincere in their desire to change, but nevertheless, they could not sustain the commitment.

Knowing how difficult it is, this work of *teshuvah*, repentance, how do we ensure that we aren't falling into the New Year's resolution trap? How do we increase the likelihood that our repentance will be meaningful and transformative? If I had an easy answer, I might be able to make a splash with the next hot-selling self-help book.

The fact is, there are no easy answers. There are no foolproof formulas to free ourselves of old ways.

Our tradition is well aware of this fact, which is why we begin the process of *Teshuva* during the entire Hebrew month of *Elul*, the month leading up to *Rosh Hashana*. The difficulty of change and growth is the reason our tradition has a multi-path approach to transformation. The *Unetane Tokef* prayer, which we will recite tomorrow, reminds us in poetic terms, that we aren't in control of the many forces in the universe that could shake our very foundation:

*Unetane Tokef*

The great shofar is sounded,

A still small voice is heard.

The angels are dismayed,

They are seized by fear and trembling

As they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment! ...

On *Rosh Hashanah* it is inscribed,

And on *Yom Kippur* it is sealed.

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,

Who shall live and who shall die...."

"Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,

Who shall perish by water and who by fire,

Who by sword and who by wild beast,

Who by famine and who by thirst...."

We may not be able to change the external circumstances which we face in our lives, and the hardships all human beings must endure, but the prayer finally enumerates the three-fold path to change ourselves: *Teshuva* - repentance (making amends and forgiving ourselves and seeking forgiveness from others), *Tefilla* - prayer (introspection and taking stock of our souls) and *Tzedaka* - righteousness (giving charity and working for social justice). These practices can all lead to personal transformation, and all three together are a powerful tool for reaching toward the goal of being a good, compassionate member of society. Still the process of change is challenging, and requires patience and perseverance.

Karyn Kedar, an inspirational Rabbi and author, gives us an imaginative rendering of the process of personal transformation in a chapter of her book *Our Dance with God*:

"I wonder what it feels like when a snake sheds its skin. Does it hurt, like ripping a bandage from your skin? Does it feel light and clean, like the first

haircut of the summer? Is there a sense of sadness and loss, or does the snake feel oddly free of old and familiar constraints?

What does it feel like when that snake forms a new skin? Does it prickle and sting? Does it itch like a healing of the wound? Is there a sense of awe at the newness of it all, or fear that what is new will not be as comfortable as what is old?

What does it feel like during those moments in between? Is that ever-so-thin layer between death and rebirth raw, tender, or numb?

These are, I believe, the sensations experienced during a shift of consciousness. It is not a simple thing to shed the beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions that we hold as tightly as skin to the soul. Yet we must shed them if we are to change in a fundamental way. It is not simple, because our very identity is based on those assumptions. It is not simple, because our beliefs have served us for a lifetime. It is not simple, because to shed a skin, to rip away our self-image, our sense of truth, is terrifying. It is not simple, because we are invested in the way things are. It simply is not simple.

We feel like a snake who first sheds its skin, then is skinless, then forms a new one.”

This visceral, tactile description of what it means to change oneself, rings so true. Who among us hasn't struggled with a bad habit? Who among us hasn't fallen back into old ways, even when our efforts to act differently are sincere? It's so easy to get angry and frustrated with ourselves when we feel we are stuck in old patterns of thought and behavior.

But I believe that self-compassion is the beginning of real possibility for *Teshuva*. *Teshuva* is often translated as “repentance”. The word “repent” has a severe ring to it. **You must repent and turn from your evil ways!** ..... But the word *Teshuva* is built on the Hebrew word *shuv* - “**to return**”.

The idea of returning. Returning to God. Returning to our truer, better selves, is a gentler way of understanding *Teshuva*. *Teshuva*, returning, is a practice which should begin with self-compassion.

We begin our lives in innocence. As we gather experience and struggle with life, and with ourselves, we forget the tender child who began the journey. Tomorrow morning, our new ICM choir will help me lead a chant on the text *Elohai Neshama*, “My God, the soul you have given me is pure.” This text is a reminder that we start life in innocence. So many of us live with regrets, with guilt and with shame. Clearly, deep personal change cannot come

about with these harsh, self-defeating attitudes. When we miss the mark, our job is to return to who we are, a pure soul, given by God, with the ability to start again.

Karen Kedar concludes her chapter on transformation:

“I yearn to be different from the center out, to re-create myself somehow over and over again, from the raw materials of my soul. I ask only to be who I was created to be, each time closer and wiser and better and nearer to the source of all things.”

I think, that’s the real message of the song with which we began. The soul is pure. We have precious life bubbling within us. Yes, life is difficult. Yes, we struggle over and over with the same failings. Transformation is hard work. But we must start gently and return again and again to our true essence.

Compassion for others starts with compassion and patience for ourselves.

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