

Teshuvah: On Becoming Our Best Selves
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In just a few moments we will begin a process of introspection and prayer. The rabbis were very smart in giving us the days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to think. Most of us leave Services after Rosh Hashanah thinking, “can’t we just come back tomorrow for Yom Kippur and get it over with?” No, our rabbis knew that patience would be a virtue par excellence during this season. These past nine days lead to this moment. The goal of these days is outlined in the Book of Isaiah who reminded us, “Seek Adonai while God may be found.” There is not greater sense of urgency or time of intense spiritual awakening as right now.

The central theme of our Service, which begins tonight, is *teshuvah* - repentance. The idea and concept of returning to one’s self is part and parcel of being Jewish. From the earliest Biblical passages we are told that we are created in the image of God so as not to create any distinction of the essence of all people. The idea is that each of us has a spark of the Divine within us and that this spark represents the essence of our souls. Our souls accordingly are perfect, but our choices, behaviors, and ways are not. Thus, repentance, from a Jewish perspective, is more about returning to this essence, returning to our purest selves more than anything else.

This idea would later be picked up on by philosophers who would argue the “state of nature,” of the human being. Some would argue that we are innately bad and that the order of sovereign governments, of laws and rules would mold us into good people. Others would argue that we are innately good, but that these same instruments are what contaminate our souls and turn us to evil ways.

Whatever the case may be for each of us, God is always open to our returning to our best selves. The urge of our souls is to cling to God, like the urge of a child is to be held close by his or her parent. The urge of our souls is to behave in ways which are worthy of our existence. The urge of our souls this evening is heightened as we are reminded once again that we are mortal.

In a recent newscast, a reporter asked a woman the following question on the occasion of her 108th birthday: "Sadie, can you please tell us what you think is the best thing about being 108? I'm sure our viewers would love to know,"

Sadie replied, "There's no peer pressure." ¹

¹ With thanks to Rabbi Richard Steinberg, “Average Person is not Average.” Delivered Kol Nidre, 5768,

Tonight is not about how we look, what we wear, what we make, what we drive, where we live or what we have. It is not about the “artificial things” which we falsely believe fulfills us. Tonight is about NOT worrying about those things, purging the desire we have for the “stuff” we fill our days with and focusing on the deepest parts of our minds, hearts and souls.

The great Renaissance artist Michelangelo was once asked how he created sculptures such as the masterpiece simply known as *David*. He explained that he simply imagined the statue already inside the block of rough marble, then chipped away the excess to reveal what had always been there. The marvelous statue, already created and eternally present, was waiting to be revealed. In her book, *Life Lessons*, Elizabeth Kubler Ross, comments on this story, “So too, is the great person already inside of you, ready to be revealed. Everyone carries the seeds of greatness.”²

Tonight we begin to chip away at ourselves trying to find that person we know we are. Like Kubler Ross states, there is a great person inside each of us. This is not the message of pop psychology, meant to help us to feel better about ourselves, to feel better about our decisions. No, this is a fundamental belief in defining the true meaning of teshuvah – of repentance.

Why then is it so difficult for us to be ourselves – our best selves? What are the obstructions, the limitations the pressures we put on ourselves that make it impossible to be the kind of people we really want to be; the kind of people we were meant to be?

In order to return to ourselves and therefore return ourselves to God, we must be willing to acknowledge the goodness we have within ourselves. Our lives, accordingly, can only be full and fulfilled, we are taught, if we take a spiritual path; if we find connection and meaning from the cosmos to our day-to-day lives.

Rabbi Martin Buber, a great philosopher of the 20th century reminds us that the way in which we can fully engage throughout the year, beyond Yom Kippur, is through what he calls “a dialogue between the above and the below.” He reminds us:

“...In the biblical conception of existence God addresses the human person and the human people with a view to what shall be, what shall be realized through each person, through this people. This means that each person is placed in freedom and that every hour in which we, in our current situations, feel ourselves to be addressed is an hour of genuine decision. In the first instance, of course, we decide only upon our own behavior, but by doing so we participate, in a measure, that we are neither able no authorized to determine, in the decision

² Ibid.

upon what the next hour will be like, and through this upon what the future generally will be like.”³

The paradox which Buber articulates is most apparent tonight. “Who will live and who will die,” is not in our own hands and remains a mystery. But what we are, what we dream of becoming and how we get there is up to each of us. It is only fear and insecurity which prevents us from fulfilling our greatest hopes and dreams for ourselves, our children and all of humanity.

Tonight we can take to heart and integrate into our minds the words of Marianne Williamsons who shares:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?

Actually who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightening about shrinking so other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to manifest the Glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some; it's in all, everyone. And as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Let us begin again, with a renewed vision and a greater sense of our best selves this process of teshuvah – of returning to ourselves and turning to God. As we “declare the sacred power of this day,” let us also declare that our destinies are shaped by our choices, acts of kindness, willingness to open our hearts and find meaning. May we all seek the opportunities beyond the words we are about to utter this day to express ourselves in ways of hope, love and peace. Amen.

³ Martin Buber, On Judaism, (Schocken Books, 1967). Page 219.