

## **Teshuvah: Returning to a Place You Have Never Been**

“Rabbi”, a member of our community said to me, “this was definitely the hardest year of my life”. And, as you can imagine, she was not the only one to tell me this. This particular person lost a parent whom they couldn’t visit in the hospital while they were sick. She felt heartbroken that the funeral was limited to so few, when it should have been attended by the *scores* of people who would have surely wanted to honor their parent. And she was unable to receive the *in-person* comfort of friends, family and community during shivah in the way she would have wanted and needed. And this is just one story. One type of loss.

How many times did we, as a community, have to endure the sickness or death of a loved one without being able to hold *their* hand? I lost *my* Bubbee last year and in the last weeks of her life I could only see her on *Facetime*. How many times did we have to compromise on our *smachot*, celebrating weddings or *bnei mitzvah* or baby namings without the physical presence of so many of those we love? Like you, I felt so far away from family as I watched the wedding of our cousin on zoom from *my couch*, when I should have been *dancing and singing* with the bride

and groom. Many kids and parents struggled with virtual school. Many parents had difficulty balancing working productively while supporting their families. And *all* of us experienced, to one degree or another, the simple loss of our ability to see the people we love and enjoy, in the way we would have *wanted* to see them. Until *our* family drove to the East Coast this summer I hadn't seen my parents in over a year. And we *still* continually agonize over whether it is safe to gather in person with people who don't live with us. To have, for example, Rosh Hashanah meals with those people we always do, or to attend an event we wish to attend but that might be too large of a gathering for our comfort. Case in point for many, services today.

Therefore, it will also not surprise you that one of the many refrains I have heard over this past year was the strong desire to "*return to normal*". To finally go back to the way things used to be. And I understand that desire, 100%. It reflects our wish to restore what was lost and to continue on solid familiar ground. It reveals our longing to put this behind us and move on. So we ask, "*When* are we going back to normal?"

But, folks, the answer is we are **not** going back to normal. We **cannot** return to what was. Yes, with Gd's help, we will indeed thankfully go back to no longer worrying about being *in person* with others, go back to *not* having to wear masks all the time, go back to traveling, and *return* to so many other activities we have avoided during the last year and a half. However, a crisis like we have endured necessarily **reshapes** us. We will **not** be the *same*, after this pandemic, nor will our society. We **cannot** return to where we were, for we, as individuals, and we, as a society, have changed. Instead, paradoxically, our "return" will be to a place we have never been before.

In Judaism there is a concept in Kashrut called Davar Hadash - "That which became new". This term describes the mundane situation when some element of a food has changed substantially enough during a process that it is no longer what it once was. So we treat it differently than before. But this Jewish law contains a *spiritual* truth as well: that sometimes people and communities transform and they too are no longer exactly what they once were. And because of this important change, we have to respond to them differently.

So for *us*, after experiencing this transformational year, the question becomes, “*how* do we want the last year and a half to **reshape** us; what have we *learned* from that period to be able to go in the future as stronger, wiser people?

It struck me, as we got closer to these critical and sacred holidays, that our desire to *return* as it relates to COVID, parallels the very theme of the High Holidays: the notion of *Teshuvah*. *Teshuvah*, as many of you know, is often translated as repentance, an English word that indicates a process by which we review our conduct, atone for wrongdoings and commit to making right, what our past actions made wrong. And this notion of *Teshuvah* is, of course, true. Yet, as many of you also know, the actual root of the word *Teshuvah* is “Shuv”, which means **return**. Our goal during this period of repentance is therefore *also* some form of a move **to return**. What, then, can we learn from the Return, or *Teshuvah*, of the High holidays, about our desire to return vis a vis COVID? And, conversely, what can this comparison help us learn about the nature of repentance, the core mitzvah of these most holy and sacred days?

First and foremost, from the Torah to the Talmud to Maimonides to our great Hasidic masters, our tradition agrees that *teshuvah* begins with sincere reflection - a *mental and spiritual* return -- as we look *back* and try to learn from our mistakes and from our past. As I shared recently, it says in *Parshat Ki Tetze*, during one of the Shabbatot leading up to the High Holidays, “*If you see your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray, **do not ignore it**; . . . you shall **bring it home** and **return it to him** . . .and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: **you must not remain indifferent.** (Deut. 22:1-3)* The great Hasidic masters boldly proclaim that there is a second layer of spiritual meaning beyond this command to return material objects. *Their* interpretation asks us to imagine that the lost objects described are elements of our pure authentic selves, the part of us directly linked to the soul Gd has given each of us. Over the course of the year many of us have “lost” or obscured these elements through wrongdoing and poor judgement. The Hasidic masters state that these verses are read during the time period leading up to the High Holidays, in order to urge us to reconnect with those holy and critical lost parts in order to make us into even better people than we were before.

Through engaging in the difficult but critical self-reflection of *teshuvah*, we not only work to enable their *return* but also we seek to enhance them. *Teshuvah*, ideally, is therefore both the act of returning to our authentic selves and then, *through* this act of return, our ability to **develop further and become even *better* versions of who we are.** Instead of a circle the Jewish version of return is like a helix, circling and growing at the same time. *Teshuvah* is the way we learn to make more *conscious* choices *based* on what we have learned from our past, about who we *want* to be in the *future*. It is the spiritual key that allows us to return to a place we have actually *never* been.

So today, tomorrow, and each day we move forward from this moment, our tradition is asking all of us to think, to ask ourselves: what *did* we learn about life during this last year? What truth, or truths, did we uncover that can guide us forward constructively? Yes, many of us suffered, and continue to suffer during this pandemic, but what will that suffering teach us so that we *can* rebuild even stronger?

I can tell you that I personally learned *many* things from this pandemic, some from losses suffered and some simply from the changing realities of life. And I would like to name four for you to consider.

One, **community matters**. I have witnessed over and over again how critical the living and breathing power of an actual community of people is to individuals, especially during unconventional times. As an example, Beth El (and other synagogues), were one of the few institutions which had as a **central goal during the pandemic** to find ways to safely gather and connect people for meaningful moments with friends and neighbors, at a time when people felt isolated and disconnected. And when actual physical presence was not feasible, we made it possible for people to feel included and connected through zoom and livestream. It was truly incredible what an uplift it was for people to see each other on Shabbat, over zoom during a class, at morning or evening minyan, for a program, to celebrate, to commemorate, to do community service, to observe the holidays or even just to have ice cream in our parking lot and hang out. As Emily and Ameilia Nagoski, professors and authors of the popular book, *Burnout*,

which was published last year, concluded: the cure for reducing stress, overcoming difficult obstacles and persevering through tough times, is not self care (though that helps) but it is the loving support of others and **regular contact** with people to whom you feel connected in some meaningful way.

What these professors describe is precisely what community provides! And this notion of community is exactly what was needed during this trying time period. As a shining example, we have an army of volunteers who call, and care for the more isolated folks in our community, spending time with them, bringing them meals, groceries or medical supplies and driving them to appointments or to the synagogue or helping out when an urgent matter pops up. In a world that gives us so many ways to remain firmly in our silo, it is community that becomes the antidote and is the foundation for us to grow and thrive. Upon reflection, I can certainly say that I have learned, even deeper than ever before, the power of community, and specifically the power of our community here at Beth El.



Two, I have learned that the truisms about the indomitable nature of the human spirit and the belief that adversity breeds creativity and growth, are most certainly true. Together, and inspired by the right values, we can, and do indeed, rise to the occasion. As Yale professor and researcher Dr. Fesharaki-Zadeh, wrote, “I absolutely believe in the concept of resilience, because we have this effective reservoir inherent in *all* of us—be it the product of evolution, or our ancestors going through catastrophes, including wars, famines, and plagues. I think inherently, we have the means to deal with crisis. The fact that you and I are speaking right now is the result of our ancestors surviving hardship. I think resilience is *part* of our psyche.”

With one another’s help, and motivated by a desire to do good, during COVID we have figured out many pathways to not only carry on our sacred work but to even make some breakthroughs and discoveries that will serve us well in the *post-pandemic* future. For example, as a society and at Beth El, we have learned how to reach people better. Case in point our livestream that is connecting so many of you to this service wherever

you are. Synagogues and places of learning have gotten *so much better* at producing classes and programs on-line, reaching across the country providing so many *more* people with the ability to learn, connect and grow with one another. These capabilities, and many more, will remain with us even when the pandemic ends. We have learned both the critical importance of *providing* multiple pathways for connection and the *skills* to make it happen on every level.

And because of COVID we have also gained greater awareness of those who are in need in the larger community. The whole world has endured the same storm but we were not all in the same boat. Some of us were clearly affected by COVID more than others. This year, we not only made sure to care for our own members that were hit hardest by COVID but we created relationships with Brightstar church on the south side and with our literal geographic neighbors in Highwood through their new award winning library and community center. With these communities we have opened up a dialogue, set up volunteer projects together and are working to provide tutoring, job coaching and other expertise to help

people in *their* communities achieve their dreams. Using the strong foundation of community we have built, plus the inspiration of the Jewish values we nurture here at Beth El, I have gained an even greater confidence in the resilience of people and our ability to create goodness even in the face of great challenge.

Three, I have learned during this strange year of the need to recalibrate priorities. Life during COVID has taught us that many of the things on which we spend our time, over which we agonize, are not actually those aspects of life we value most. Think of your own life and about what you worry and how you spend your time. I have come to realize, more than ever, that family, community, doing acts of kindness for others, doing our jobs with dedication and integrity, observing traditions, learning, exploring deeper meaning and sharing moments with those we love, are at the essence of life.

I will give you a personal example. Last weekend 35 out of 43 of my Bubbee's descendants came together. On Friday, we dedicated her headstone and memorialized her. On Friday night and Saturday we

celebrated Shabbat together: a huge dinner, time in shul and lots of stories and laughs. On Sunday we joyously gathered to give a Hebrew name to one of the newest members of the family, my cousin Mia. That weekend, we combined family, Judaism, tradition, community, joy, remembrance and love. Through these experiences, guided by the values we cherished most, we connected with the very essence of life and we literally *felt* the sustaining power and fulfillment that comes with doing so. We can all learn from experiences like these that we indeed should make our *future* choices on how to spend our time, and our future *decisions* about what activities to pursue, based primarily on the *values* we have learned to hold dear - those that connect us with what is most important.

So many of you have told me that you too have learned things during the pandemic, about spending time with family, about work/life balance, about the power of community, as well as about the importance of Judaism and the synagogue. So, my practical advice is this: literally, look at your schedule. Ask yourself for each item you see there, which value does that activity fulfill? Assess: is the amount of time you are spending on the

various activities in your life in line with your values? Are there aspects of life that you care about that are somehow missing? Use the wisdom of our tradition and the time and space gifted to you by these High Holidays - reflect on what you learned this last year, and recalibrate your life so that you can live the values each and every day that are sacred to you. To return to an even better place than you were before.

Finally, this year I learned in a more personal way how important a spiritual life truly is. When forces beyond our control take over life in the way that COVID has, it reminds us of the bigger context. While we wouldn't *want* to be reminded of this great spiritual truth in this particular way, it is important not to squander the opportunity for insight. In a positive way, we have been awakened again to see our place in a larger universe, a universe with power and mystery. We recognize that we, as humans and Jews, do indeed seek to express ourselves: to pray, to learn, to draw close to the essence of life and to Gd. We have experienced the sustaining power in shared spirituality, through ritual and tradition. For these religious acts link us simultaneously to others *and* to Gd - to the past

*and* to the future. Like celebrating Rosh Hashanah as you are now, these spiritual moments serve as markers in time, touchstones for memory and opportunities for experiencing and acknowledging the strong *emotions* we carry within us as people. As humans and as Jews we *need* these opportunities; they help us to live life to the fullest and to honor the multiplicity of experiences we encounter throughout our journey. A spiritual life is the critical companion to our physical existence

These are *my* reflections from *my* engagement in the process of teshuvah, from *returning in my mind* to this past year. They tell a story of hardship and a parallel story of wisdom, strength and compassion. My reflection, my *teshuvah*, lets me *learn* from my suffering, from the changes in the world and, in the more classic sense, from my mistakes, in order to become wiser and better, to not only to return myself to where I *once* was, but to return to a place I have never been before.

There is a cartoon by Mike Flanagan that teaches this in an amusing way. It shows an amazed girl saying to her friend in admiration, “You never make the same mistake twice! You always come up with a new

one!”. We too can learn from the past, maybe not in order to make new *mistakes*, but rather to grow and live better in the future.

“Return to normal”, since when do the Jewish people want normal? And do you really want to return to wearing suits, or even pants, to work? We shouldn’t want to return to normal. What Judaism pushes us to seek is to return instead to *greater* engagement, to life, to connection, to community, to spirituality and to love. We must *lift up* our eyes so that after the hardest year of our lives what we want is not getting back to normal but seizing opportunities to grow, learn and improve. Just as the name of our own synagogue teaches us, when Jacob our forefather came to what became known as Beth El, he fell asleep, alone, using a rock for a pillow. He had been cast out of the family home because his brother sought to kill him after he had tricked his father to receive the first born blessing. He was bereft, penniless and alone. However, when he slept, he dreamt and he saw Gd and angels who gave him a message of hope at a difficult time. When he awoke, he said, “God was in this place and I did not know it” and he took the very stone that served as a hard unyielding

pillow and transformed it into *Davar Hadash*, something new. And he made a pillar out of it and on that stone he made an offering of thanksgiving to Gd.

As *we* move forward into the new year my prayer is that like Jacob we take our stone pillow and turn it into an altar, that we take our hardship and use it as a foundation to dream and that we transform our wilderness into Beth El - a House of Gd. For Gd is here even if sometimes we don't know it. Let us do our Teshuvah, let us travel the past in our mind, and let us miraculously *return* to a place we have never been before: wiser, stronger, more hopeful, more determined and full of compassion. *Shanah Tovah!*