

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5765
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Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
“A Passion to Return”

A friend of mine (no one in this room) who is a lesbian and a mother has a daughter that she conceived with the help of anonymous sperm from a sperm bank. Her daughter is now five, and not too long ago my friend (I'll call her Kate) introduced the idea of a donor to her daughter (I'll call her Jasmyn) - just a brief conversation, not too intense.

Some weeks later, Kate happened by when her daughter was working on an art project. Struck by Jasmyn's obvious talent for art - especially when Kate herself can barely draw stick figures - my friend said to her daughter “Sweetie, you're so good at art and I'm not at all - the donor must have been an artist.” The conversation ended there.

Some days later 5 year old Jasmyn made a joke that Kate thought was really funny. Kate, who prides herself on her own sense of humor (with good reason - she's one of the funniest people I know), said, “Jasmyn, that was really funny. You have such a good sense of humor.”

“Yes,” said the 5 year old comic, “the donor must have been hilarious.”

Oh, oh, now Kate was offended --- “Hey, what about me?” she said, “I'm funny.”

Jasmyn looked at her mom, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “yeah, but not as funny as the donor.”

Here we are again - at the turning of yet another year, and our annual RSVP to Judaism's invitation to take an accounting of our selves and our souls. To assess where we are and where we want to go; to consider not only who we are and who we want to be, but also to consider how we came to be the persons we are. Your passions, your interests, your actions, your thoughts, your way of being in the world --- how did you come by them? How much of you - of who you are - comes from the particulars of who your “donors” were and how much is your very own? To whom should we give credit for our sweet dispositions or our troubled ones? what do we credit (or debit) to circumstance, to bad luck, to parenting, to trauma - childhood or otherwise, to blessings bestowed, punishments delivered, miracles - of the daily variety or the once-in-a-lifetime kind?

and how much credit do we give ourselves for the choices we make - good ones and less good - that have led us into particular circumstances and relationships - happy ones and not so happy? How much credit and responsibility ought we take for our lives? for our choices? for our talents? our interests? our “leanings”? our “callings”? how we pursue them? how we nurture them?

Free will is given to all human beings, says our 12th century teacher, Maimonides, also known as Rambam, playing off our even older sacred texts: Mishnah and Gemara [Pirkei Avot 3:15, Berachot 33b]. “if we desire to turn to the path of good and be righteous, we can so choose. Should we desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, that choice is also ours.” [5:1, Hilchot Teshuva, Mishneh Torah]

Listen to Rambam again: “If we desire to turn to the path of good and be righteous, we can so choose. Should we desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, that choice is also ours.” Rambam's comments are, I suppose, the basis of our assignment for this time of year: Or perhaps better to say, our assignment as human beings in general, and, like everything our tradition encourages us to do, if it were easy, and the most natural way to move in the world, we wouldn't need the reminders and instructions, nor would we need what we get this time of year: the encouragement, the invitation, to, step-by-step, make our way out of the difficulties and tight spaces we find ourselves in.

What does it mean, as Maimonides says a few verses later: “Since free choice is in our hands and our own decision [is what prompts us to] commit all these wrongs...it is proper for us to ‘search and examine our ways and return to God.’” [Ibid., 5.2]

Search and examine our ways and return to God, nashuvah ad Adonai [Lamentations 3:40].

There’s that root again, the word of the season - nashuvah, shuvah - return. And teshuvah, repentance - our assignment this time of year - also comes from this root, also means “to return.”

The instruction to return begs certain questions: return from what? return to what? If what we’re doing when we repent is turning from our evil ways, trying to become better people, why is the direction to return? to go back? Isn’t back where we were doing wrong? why isn’t it to go forward -doesn’t forward seem more logical, if you’re trying to get away from something? to move on? to grow?

One of my colleagues explains a particular understanding of teshuvah -of “return”- as a “linking back to our origins as innocent babies and as a fledgling Jewish people.” She explains that “On both personal and national levels we originate from goodness and light, to which we are capable of returning. When we are kinder and more upright, better people who work towards a better society, this does not come from our being transported to another plane but rather from our becoming all we were meant to be at our very beginnings.” [[Rabbi Susan Laemmle, Shabbat Shuvah drash 5764 at Temple Beth Am LA]]]

And while I’m drawn to that image, I don’t want to take us back quite so far in our teshuva, in our returning - either as a people or as an individual person. I don’t want us to return to infancy, when we knew nothing (or at least didn’t know we knew anything), but rather to the points in our lives when we did know, when we knew something was wrong because we knew something about ourselves - whether we could articulate that something or not.

Contemporary scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes this ‘return’, this kind of ‘teshuvah’: “The urge to take a look back,” he writes, “is prompted by a spiritual disquiet rather than a guilty feeling. Indeed, we feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place, we feel that we are becoming outsiders in a world whose scheme of things has escaped us.” I know a lot of us have been feeling that way about our world lately, -“ that we are becoming outsiders in a world whose scheme of things has escaped us,” but let’s save that political discussion for another time (sometime soon, but not right now). Rabbi Steinsaltz continues in his description of teshuvah:

“...we feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place...This is why we decide to turn around and go back.”

To feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place. Have you ever felt that feeling? I certainly have. And I think one reason Steinsaltz’s description gripped me so when I first read it, is that I think it speaks in particular ways to our community.

Consider the times you have felt this way. Perhaps you too have felt, as I have at times in my life, that the life you are living, the relationships you have made (or not made), the work you do in the world, are not really you. For me, and I suspect for many of us, the disjointedness was caused by a willingness to suppress core parts of myself - that I was a lesbian, for example, or that I am a Jew who cares about living a Jewish life, for another example.

We hear it in nearly every coming out story [- not a few of which we've heard from this bima in years past -] -that sense of dysphoria, those feelings of anxiety, depression, unease - however it plays out for you. It's about the ways we don't answer to our own hearts.

Of course there are many ways we fail to tune into, to recognize, to respect what is within our own hearts, and our failures to respond - our efforts to suppress the need to listen to our hearts - are bound to manifest themselves. Let me give you few examples, each of which, by the way, I have heard from more than one of you just this past year: remaining in a job or a love relationship that took its toll on one's physical or emotional well-being; the use and abuse of drugs, alcohol, sex; food, gambling, dangerous activities; a tendency to isolate, hermiting oneself away; fear of letting go; and its ever popular opposite: fear of commitment; over committing for fear of disappointing others or oneself; trying to control situations and as well as people - really believing that your way is the "right way," maybe even the only way to do something; a reluctance to be happy, thinking you don't deserve happiness; remaining tied to responsibilities no longer ours, or never ours; bemoaning change, as if resisting it would keep it from happening, as if change is in and of itself something bad.

And that's my short list of self-sabotage! Sometimes we realize we're doing it, but still can't stop; and other times we can't even see what it is we're doing, we can only feel the pain. As one of my teachers [Rabbi Laura Geller] taught me:
"Change is inevitable, growth is optional."

I'm thinking of putting it on a bumper sticker. But in the mean time, we shouldn't need a bumper sticker to remind us - we have Judaism, we have this season, these Days of Awe, days of teshuvah, of turning, and returning, looking within, looking to one another. A gift of time and focus in which the sole (soul) intention is to invite us not only to change, but also to grow.

Tomorrow morning we will read in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer not only its most remembered verse - that "on Rosh Hashanah it is written and Yom Kippur it is sealed who shall live and who shall die." But the meditation includes also the less remembered, though no less potent, verses: "who shall have rest and who can never be still, who shall be serene and who torn apart, who shall be at ease and who afflicted..." I think of these "downers" not as punishments, and not coming from the world outside us, but coming from within.

Of course there are many ways to understand these verses, but here is one way to look at them: who can never be still rather than find rest? those who do not act on what they know to be right for themselves. who will be torn apart rather than know serenity? those who will torment themselves with should haves and could haves. who will be afflicted rather than at ease? those who blame others for what is their own hands to change or to do. All of that, plus this last verse of that long, long prayer returns us to tshuvah: "But tshuvah (along with prayer and charitable acts) avert the severity of the decree" says our translation of oo-t'shuvah, oo-t'filah, oo-tzadakah ma-ah-vi-rin et ro-ah ha-g'zeirah.

Steinsaltz continues his reflections on tshuvah:

"...we feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place...This is why we decide to turn around and go back. . . ." He goes on:

"To feel the need to repent means to realize that a change is imperative. Teshuvah does not mean that we moan about our past wrongdoing . . .

We should not rethink and relive our past as it happened, with its faults and mistakes.

What we should ponder is our past as it ought to have been.

The main thrust of teshuvah is indeed to show the definite intention of changing the scheme of things.

Someone who repents, someone who... does teshuvah, is someone who feels the need not only to redeem but to rebuild one's past, in the literal sense of the term."

[reprinted in URJ Reaching for Holiness, 2001, p.31, from his book, The Strife of Spirit, 1998, Jason Aronson Books

“not only to redeem but to rebuild one’s past, in the literal sense of the term.” says Rabbi Steinsaltz

Some friends recently told me about a new book by gay social historian Will Fellows. Called A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture [The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004], Fellows, mainly through oral histories, argues convincingly that we ought to be exploring our community’s stereotypes more than we have. He’s choosing to spend less time on the argument that gay people are just like everyone else, and more time on what else, besides our choice of sex partners, makes us different. In this book he looks particularly at the prevalence of gay men interested in historic preservation, by which he means “not only the saving [and restoration] of buildings but also the saving of smaller objects and documents, as well as the compilation of family and community history.” [from his letter of inquiry to participants, p.15]

These sound a lot like Jewish obsessions, don’t they?

One reason I’m fascinated by his considerations is of course that they complement mine so well! I am very interested in what makes our people different - gay people, lesbian people, bisexual people, transgender people, Jewish people...village people!...Jewish glbt people, people who hang out with Jewish glbt people. I’m less interested in exploding stereotypes, and more interested in exploring the truth in stereotypes. Although Fellows’ work is concerned only with gay men, his study helps confirm for me that there are many connections between Jewish sensibilities and glbt sensibilities on this topic of preservation, for he also connects the gay passion for preservation to a gay passion for religion. He points out the marvelous similarities just based on the etymologies of the English words “preservation” - from Latin meaning “to observe beforehand,” “to protect, to guard,” the origin of the word “restoration” from Latin derivations meaning “to make stand again” [American Heritage Dictionary, including Appendix 1 sta], and the word “religion” which also comes from Latin meaning “to bind together again, to put back together again,” [p.244 Passion to Preserve].

I want to go broader than Fellows does - for I think that many of us in this sanctuary - and not only gay men -- know the yearnings Fellows describes - know what it means to be drawn to preserving records of the past, to restoring a sense of the past. I think it’s part of why GLBT people are drawn to Judaism in what seems like disproportionate numbers to our numbers in the general population. For the basics of this passion to preserve are also a lot like what living a Jewish life asks of us - being connected to a past, building on a past - both a communal past, a communal history, and our own individual pasts. Fellows takes note, for example, of how many gay men got into their passion to preserve through their grandmothers. How many of us came to Judaism through a grandparent?

And like the gay men Fellows interviews most of us don’t do this preserving of our culture, of our history, in order to live in the past, but rather, to let the past live in us. To let us build on the past and use it to grow ourselves into the future. To take the best of what was there, preserve or restore it, keep it in front of our eyes as a reminder of where we came from, of who we are, of who we want to be.

The Breed Street Shul restoration here in LA- in Boyle Heights - is a good example of what I’m talking about. Is it a coincidence that its prime mover - Steve Sass - is a gay Jew with a passion for history? and the fact that Steve and his compatriots dream of rebuilding the shul not to be a shul again, not to encourage Jews to move back to Boyle Heights (not that that would be a bad thing), but rather so that it can be a structure and a center for the community who lives there now. And another motive, allowing Jews and the current Latino community of Boyle Heights to

grow closer together through this common bond, is also part of what Fellows comments on in his book, pointing out that many gay men involved in building restoration are also involved in community building [he makes this point in various places].

Beyond buildings, there are other passions we have in our community for restoring, rebuilding, preserving. Take the ever-growing interest in Yiddish language and culture. In this movement too, glbt people are represented in disproportionate numbers.

And in Judaism, in general, as well. I and the many lesbian and gay rabbis (and gay cantors) out and about in the world today exist in disproportionate numbers in the rabbinate and cantorate. We too are in this restoration category. We treasure the tradition, but we also seek to redeem it; seeking to return Judaism to its essence, even as we turn to its essence as our way of life.

We seek connection to a past, and also an improvement on the past, continual growth. In that, the lgbt clergy (Jewish and other religions as well, by the way) are not alone. How many of you are here tonight because as children you learned that synagogue is where you go on erev Rosh Hashanah? And yet, for most of us, we don't want the service here to be exactly as it was when we were kids - if we did, we'd probably attend a different synagogue than this one. And of course many of us didn't grow up learning anything about what to do on Rosh Hashanah, yet somewhere along the way the idea of this gathering, this coming together, steeped as it is in traditions that may or may not be familiar to us, still appeals to something in us. We yearn for something, perhaps the kind of connectedness it offers-- or we wouldn't be here.

This longing for connectedness is something else Fellows describes well. The passion to preserve, he suggests, is quite different from the passion to make something new, to start from scratch. his passion for restoration and preservation, he writes, "humanizes old buildings and objects because of their associations: used by one's forebears, they are not simply old things to use or discard. They are human, tangible bonds with the past, shapers of one's identity" [Fellows, top of p. 255].

Isn't it ironic that we - the very people who are accused of being boundary crossers and tradition smashers - are among the ones in the forefront of preserving and redeeming traditions (could there be a more contemporary current example of this than same gender marriage? but more on that another time).

Remember Rabbi Steinsaltz's comment? "Someone who repents, someone who... does teshuvah, is someone who feels the need not only to redeem but to rebuild one's past, in the literal sense of the term."

The word "redeem" not only means "to set free" "to save," as in God redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, it also means "to recover ownership of" and it also means "to restore the honor, worth, or reputation of." Surely Rabbi Steinsaltz intends all these meanings when he tells us to redeem our past. Recover ownership of those times in our lives when we "were not the right person in the right place," then restore the honor, the worth of our past.

"It is no use ruminating over the faults committed in the past," says the open-hearted Rabbi Steinsaltz. "Those faults ought to be regarded as the seeds of virtue, in that they represent the trigger mechanism of the journey back, which enables us to rebuild our personality and our past."

Teshuva, an invitation to return, to look for the "seeds of virtue" is a gift Judaism gives to each of us each year - a brilliant design for a life - optimistic, artful, filled with a sense of hope, of beauty, of possibility. Our ancestors - our donors - who created it must have been artists, artists with a sense of humor no less. In a world and in lifetimes too often filled with destruction and grief, they maintain the certain knowledge that the world could yet become a better place, that they could become better people. Let us receive their gifts graciously, and use our own to redeem their dreams . . . and ours.

shana tova u'metukah May this year be for each one of us a passionate year of returning and restoring, rebuilding and growth - of hearts, of souls, of lives.