

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

Shanah tovah. Happy New Year.

Tonight is the first of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, sometimes translated “repentance,” but better translated “return.” As though we’re going back to something - as in the verse from Lamentations that we recite on Tisha B’Av that begins this penitential period and that is included in every Torah service, as we put the Torah in the ark: “Return us to You, O God, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old.”

I’ve asked here before - what are we returning to? - and shared the story of my journey to Judaism and the discovery that I was already what I had returned to.

And yet, I still wonder: is there really a place or a time in which my character was whole, more pure, more focused, more skillful, less caught up in fear and anger and resentment? If so, I am certainly not aware of it.

But a commentary by Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev suggests that teshuvah is not a “going back” or a reclaiming but a “turning toward,” a renewal - an opening to something new.

Levi Yitzhak begins with our verse:

/οσεφ υβηνη ασφ πχυαβυ ληκτ □ω υβχηαω

Return us to You, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old. (Lam.5:21)

and asks:

What is the meaning of the word “as of old (kekedem)”?

That’s my question too. He goes on to say:

*We can clarify this according to the rabbinic teaching on the verse, “**And now, Israel, what does the Holy One your God ask of you? Only to fear the Holy One, to walk in God’s ways, to love God, to serve the Holy One your God with all your heart and with all your soul.**” (Deut.10:12).*

And he says that:

“The word ‘and now (ve-atah)’ suggests a moment of teshuvah” (Gen.R. 21:6).

What does that mean?

...each and every Jew must believe with complete trust that in each and every moment she receives vitality/life force (chiyyut) from the Blessed Creator. This is what the Sages taught on the verse,

“Let all that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps.150:6)

“with each and every breath praise the Lord” (Gen.R. 14:11)

Rosh HaShanah 2007/5768 – The Challenge to Change

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

Do we believe that our breath can renew us? That each breath can be an opportunity to start afresh? According to Levi Yitzhak, that belief is essential:

...each moment the Holy One sends renewed vigor. Every person has the capacity to experience teshuvah. In the moment that a person transforms himself through teshuvah he also believes that he has become a new creation. On that basis the Holy One, in His great mercy, does not recall his earlier transgressions. But, if a person does not believe this, then his teshuva is ineffective.

Transformation leads to belief, and, at the same time, belief leads to transformation.

When we believe that we are made new each moment, each “now,” our teshuvah will be effective.

And now.

With every breath, with every moment, there is possibility.

And now.

So is this an aspiration or a reality? Can we really change?

I know that in many ways, I'm the same person I was when I was 8 - with a lot of the same feelings, same concerns, same difficulties. And yet, experiences change me, challenge me to grow and respond in new and different ways. I'm a parent, I have challenging experiences every day. And often I feel like I make the same mistakes, have the same struggles, year in and year out. And sometimes, I don't.

Perhaps those of you who are students see as obvious the opportunity for growth. You are at a time period of tremendous changes. But maybe you've already run into frustration. For the rest of us - we have definitely run into frustration.

But the message of the High Holidays is one of hope: believe we can grow, believe we can change. We see this affirmation, in the texts we read: the traditional reading for the first day of Rosh HaShanah is the birth of Isaac. Sarah was 90 (90!) when she bore Isaac, laughing incredulously at the thought of having a son (no less creating a new people!) at that impossible age.

And tomorrow we, and many Reform Jews< will read the story of creation, as this is the anniversary of that day: as we will recite shortly: *hayom harat olam*, “today the world was

created.” And yet, our morning liturgy tells us every day that God daily, with goodness, renews the work of creation:

Every day. Every moment, we may be renewed. If we believe.

Perhaps you've heard this story of transformation:

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

In June of 1991 a cantor and his family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska and were greeted by threats from the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

Although Larry Trapp was a diabetic and in a wheelchair, he had tremendous impact and was, in fact, responsible for the fire-bombings of several African-Americans' homes around Lincoln and for what he called "Operation Gooks," the burning of the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Center in Omaha. At the time, he was making plans to bomb B'nai Jeshuran, the synagogue where Weisser was the spiritual leader.

When Trapp launched a white supremacist series on a local-access cable channel, Cantor Michael Weisser was incensed. He called the number for the hotline of the KKK--"the Vigilante Voices of Nebraska"--and listened to Trapp's harsh voice spewing out a racist diatribe on the answering machine. Michael called several times just to keep the line busy, but then began to leave his own messages. "Larry," he said. "Why do you hate me? You don't even know me, so how can you hate me?"

Whenever he thought of it, Michael called and left another message. One night, however, he asked Julie, "What will I do if the guy ever picks up the phone?"

"Tell him you want to do something nice for him," she said: "Tell him you'll take him to the grocery store or something. Anything to help him. It will catch him totally off guard."

For weeks, Michael listened to Trapp's taped invectives denouncing "niggers", "queers," "kikes" and "gooks". Each time, Weisser would reply with a message of his own.

One day, just after Michael said, "Larry, when you give up hating, a world of love is waiting for you," Trapp, who was feeling increasingly annoyed by the calls, picked up the phone and shouted, "What the----do you want?"

"I just want to talk to you," said Michael.

"Why the----are you harassing me? Stop harassing me!"

"I don't want to harass you, Larry," Michael said. "I just want to talk to you."

"I know your voice. You black by any chance?"

"No, I'm Jewish."

"You are harassing me," said Trapp. "What do you want? Make it quick."

Michael remembered Julie's advice. "Well, I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help," he said. "I know you're in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something."

Rosh HaShanah 2007/5768 – The Challenge to Change

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

Trapp couldn't think of anything to say. Michael listened to the silence. Finally, Trapp cleared his throat and, when he spoke, his voice sounded different.

"That's okay," he said. "That's nice of you, but I've got that covered. Thanks anyway. But don't call this number anymore."

Before Trapp could hang up, Michael replied, "I'll be in touch."

Michael's calls were making Trapp feel confused. And a letter he received from a former nurse in Lincoln also affected him. If you give your love to God, "like you gave yourself to the KKK," she wrote, "he'll heal you of all that bitterness, hatred and hurt...in ways you won't believe."

Then, at a visit to his eye doctor, Trapp felt his wheelchair moving. "I helping you on elevator," said a young female voice behind him. He asked where she was from. "I from Vietnam," she said. That evening, he found himself crying as he thought about the scent of the woman's gardenia perfume, his memories of "Operation Gooks" and his assaults on the Vietnamese community.

"I'm rethinking a few things," he told Michael in a subsequent phone call. But a few days later he was on TV, shrieking about "kikes" and "half-breeds" and "the Jews' media."

Furious, Michael called Trapp, who answered his phone. "It's clear you're not rethinking anything at all," Michael said, demanding an explanation.

In a tremulous voice, Trapp said, "I'm sorry I did that. I've been talking like that all of my life....I can't help it....I'll apologize."

Around dinnertime the next day, the Weissers' phone rang. "I want to get out," Trapp said, "but I don't know how."

Michael suggested that he and Julie go over to Trapp's apartment to talk in person and "break bread together." Trapp hesitated, then finally agreed.

When the door to Trapp's apartment creaked open, Michael and Julie saw the bearded Larry Trapp in his wheelchair. An automatic weapon was slung over the doorknob and a Nazi flag hung on the wall. Michael took Trapp's hand, and Trapp winced as if hit by a jolt of electricity. Then he broke into tears.

Larry began to sob. "I'm so sorry for all the things I've done," he said. Michael and Julie put their arms around Larry and hugged him. Overwhelmed by emotion, they started crying, too.

In November, Trapp resigned from the Klan and soon quit all his other racist organizations. Later, he wrote apologies to the many people he had threatened or abused. "I wasted the first forty years of my life and caused harm to other people," Larry said. "Now I've learned we're one race and one race only."

Rosh HaShanah 2007/5768 – The Challenge to Change

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

On New Year's Eve, Trapp learned he had less than a year to live. That night, the Weissers invited him to move into their home, and he did so. They converted their living room into his bedroom. As his health deteriorated, Julie quit her job to care for him.

On days when Larry was well enough, he listened to speeches by Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King and books on Gandhi and Malcolm X. He also began to listen to books on Judaism and to study it in earnest.

On June 5, 1992, Larry Trapp converted to Judaism in ceremonies at B'nai Jeshurun, the very synagogue that he previously had planned to blow up. Three months later, he died in the Weisser home, with Michael and Julie beside him, holding his hands.

I've previously read this story with an eye to the power of love and forgiveness and the beautiful souls of the Weisslers - and it is that. But it is also a story of the amazing courage of Larry Trapp. Imagine how hard it must have been for Larry Trapp to change. He had a lot to lose. All he had was the power and prestige and status he'd acquired from being the Grand Dragon. Change would cost him all he had. And in many ways, it did.

It's a challenge to be open to change. We hope for it, but what are the risks if we do change? How do we know that our gains will outweigh our losses? And what if we hope for change in ourselves or others, and it doesn't happen? This is a beautiful, powerful story, but it could have turned out very differently.

I do believe in possibility, in growth and change and yet, the process of change is frightening, marked by fits and starts and two steps forward and one - or three - steps back - in myself and in others.

I am the parent of 3 special needs children. One had been in placement for nearly four years and returned home this summer. So school arrived with hope and anxiety for both of us. The first week - which was 3 days - was amazing - she got up, every day, easily. She joined the volleyball team - fabulous. And I struggled: do I accept this and rejoice or do I gird myself against the day she doesn't get up?

How do I stay open to her change and yet protect myself (and her) from the sadness, or disappointment I will feel when she has a bad day (which she inevitably will - and, in fact, did, on Monday, the 4th day of school).

There's a tension between openness and self-protection. And not only with others, perhaps even more so with ourselves. How do we strive and yet not be hurt or plunged into despair by our (inevitable) failures?

This tension is one that's articulated and embodied in some of the spiritual practices I've been exploring over the past few years - and which you, too, can explore at Slifka Center. The practice of yoga is often described as a balance of softness and effort, and mindfulness meditation is about transformation that only comes about through acceptance of the present.

Rosh HaShanah 2007/5768 – The Challenge to Change

Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale

These are opposites, oxymoronic even, that we must hold, and that we do hold, and I've been desperate to integrate these realities.

And then Levi Yitzchak concludes his thoughts on teshuvah by bringing a story from the Talmud:

Rabbi Yehoshua asked Elijah: When will the Messiah come?

Elijah answered, Go and ask him. Rabbi Yehoshua asked: Where is he?

Elijah said, You can find him at the gates of Rome. He sits among the lepers. They unwind all of their bandages at the same time and then cover their sores with clean bandages. The Messiah is the only one who unwinds and rewinds his bandages one at a time, thinking, I want to be ready at a moment's notice if I am called.

Rabbi Yehoshua went to the gates of Rome and approached the Messiah and said, Peace be upon you, my master and teacher. The leper looked knowingly at him and replied, Peace be upon you, son of Levi. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, When will the master come? Today, said the leper. Rabbi Yehoshua returned to Elijah and said, He lied to me, saying, Today I will come. But he has not come. Elijah said, No, he did not say that he would come today. Rather, he was quoting a Psalm verse to you: Today, if only you will listen to His voice (Psalm 95:7). (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a)

He says:

What the teaching means is that the Messiah will come when you have attained this quality, that with every day you become a new being.

Our belief in the possibility of transformation (not actually effecting the transformation itself - just believing it can happen) brings the Messiah. Or, in our contemporary understanding: peace and justice, redemption, to the world. Jews don't usually talk about personal redemption - Jewish models of salvation are social, political, universal: the end of poverty and war and illness, world peace. But perhaps they're connected.

Our transformation impacts not only ourselves. When we are more fully ourselves, more open, more present, less bound by fears and hurts, we transform our relationships, and then, maybe even our society.

In the words of Gandhi: "You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Today - if we but listen to God's voice. God's voice that calls to us from within. In our each and every breath and heartbeat. In each moment it says to us: change is possible, you can grow, you can heal, you can connect to others - as long as you believe. Today. Now. May you be renewed for good in the coming year, in each and every moment. Shanah tovah.