

When I talk to Jewishly-inclined friends about shabbat, the holiday cycle, Jewish mourning practices, they generally tell me how powerful these observances are. They describe how rituals like shivah, kaddish, and shabbat meals make a difference in their lives.

However, when the subject of teshuvah comes up, these same committed Jews are likely to joke about it self-consciously. At best, they'll acknowledge it's something they wish they could do, but that seems well-nigh impossible — at least in the situations and relationships where it's most needed.

We study the laws of teshuvah, read the words in the machzor, maybe even feel guilty about our inability to do much more than say those words. But as for teshuvah being a tool that's effective and available to us, that's not what I hear about.

Shai Agnon, in the chapter on Shabbat Shuvah in his High Holiday compendium, *Yamim Noraim*, tells a story about Rabbi Heschel of Apt¹.

Rabbi Heschel was slated to give a drash — presumably on Shabbat Shuvah — but feared he might say the wrong thing. So, as a precaution, he brought along his own personal *mochiach*, or chastiser. When the rav got up to speak the *mochiach* stood next to him and offered a real-time critique. At some point, when the frequent interruptions and sharp criticism really got to him, the rabbi gave up and sat down.

It's difficult to speak about teshuvah. I've struggled with how to approach the subject, afraid I'll come off as self-righteous, ignorant, insensitive — or maybe all three. I'm not a rabbi. I'm not a therapist. Yet I don't want us to ignore the subject today.

¹ Agnon, S. Y., *Yamim Noraim* (Hebrew), Schocken, 1979, p. 194

So if you'll indulge me, I'd like to act as my own *mochiach* / chastiser. Those of you who have been critiquing me in your heads can relax for a bit. I've got this.

[as Mochiach] **Lee — or should I say Laibel Velvel since we're up here at the bima — if your experience with teshuvah has been negative, what good does it do to share your record of failure? Maybe you just haven't worked hard enough. How can you stand up here — on Shabbat Shuvah, no less — and discourage others from even trying? And what evidence can you provide that you know anything about teshuvah in the first place?**

Whew! Thanks for that.

Well, come to think of it, I do have a teshuvah story:

Years ago I was visiting a dear friend. We went for a stroll on shabbat afternoon, and after we'd walked for a bit, my friend told me that there was something he needed to say. He explained that I had hurt him deeply and despite all his efforts to get past it, he wasn't able to. A few years earlier, his wife had endured a very difficult pregnancy — months of challenges and anxiety — and through it all I had been absent. He had needed me and I wasn't there. His words shocked me. I honestly had no idea I had been so negligent, and felt overwhelmed with shame and guilt.

But looking back at this incident now, many years later, it's not my remorse that has stayed with me. Rather, I have two main take-aways:

First, gratitude that my friend valued our relationship enough to offer me the chance to repair it.

And second, a sad recognition of my cluelessness. I hadn't the least notion that I had the power to make a difference in his life. What could I offer someone going through complex health and personal challenges? I wasn't an obstetrician, and I lived thousands of miles away. But those practicalities were beside the point. I should have found a way to show that I cared. The hurt I caused was likely directly proportional to the support I might have offered.

[as Mochiach] **Sweet story. I'm touched. But your friend really sparked the teshuvah, you just took the bait. In fact, it never would have happened if your friend hadn't had the guts to, shall we say, *chastise* you...**

Fair enough, but the lesson I take from this is that teshuvah isn't just about cataloging our mistakes — it's also about recognizing our potential to do good. There are two sides to it.

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, who lived from 1873 to 1936, taught:

“Woe to the person who is unaware of their shortcomings, because they will not know what to work on. But even greater woe to a person who is unaware of their virtues because they don't even know what they have to work with.”²

Or as Rabbi Shai Held puts it: “[Teshuvah is] less about castigating ourselves or enumerating our manifold sins than it is about remembering what we are capable of and taking stock of what we still need to do...”³

² As quoted in Held, Shai, *Judaism is About Love*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024, p. 33

³ Held, p. 395, footnote 39.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, maintained that we entirely misunderstand the concept of teshuvah. We translate the word as “repentance,” but, he writes:

Repentance in Hebrew is not teshuvah but *charatah*. Not only are these terms not synonymous. They are opposites. *Charatah* implies remorse or a feeling of guilt about the past and an intention to behave in a completely new way in the future...

But teshuvah means returning to the old, to one’s original nature.

The central concept of teshuvah is that there is essential goodness to be found in us, however far we may have strayed or been deflected from it. Teshuvah is not about wholesale change. It is about “rediscovery.”⁴

[To mochiach] Hey, Mochiach, you still there?

[as Mochiach] **Yeah... The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that? Really?**

Yes, and a similar idea is reflected in today’s haftarah.

Listen to the first words, from the prophet Hosea:

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנֶיךָ:

“Turn back, O Israel, to the Lord your G-d for you have stumbled in your iniquity.” [Hosea 14:2]

⁴ Schneerson, Menachem M., *Torah Studies*, Kehot, 1996, p. 334 - 337

In its Biblical context, this admonition is addressed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel as a nation. They're told to turn back to G-d and reassured that if they do so, G-d will heal them and love them and G-d's wrath will turn from them.

But how does this "returning" apply to us as individuals today? I get tripped up by the G-d language. What might returning to G-d mean?

How can I "return" to a place I've never been before?

One can take a literalist approach and say that returning to G-d simply means fulfilling the commandments — but the text hints at more than that. It feels meaningful to me when I read it as return to Source, to essence, to first principles. It's that same positive message: we need to rediscover the essential goodness that is part of our nature. It's a place we've been before.

[as Mochiach] **"Essential goodness" — really!? Have you met any actual human beings? Do you follow the news?**

Yes, human nature is complex. Finding the good within us may require sifting through a great deal of other stuff — and learning to redirect some of our passions toward more worthy goals.

To do that, maybe what we need is not so much a *mochiach* — no offense...

[as Mochiach] **None taken.**

...What we need is not someone to chastise us — but rather, maybe a coach, who can help us identify and work on our weaknesses, or a cheerleader who knows how to encourage effort and celebrate success.

Maybe these are roles we can learn to play for one another.

My guess is that most of us are pretty good at being our own *mochiachs*. There's value in that. But we need to be more.

Teshuva is not only about recognizing our failings and striving to repair the damage. It's also about rediscovering, nurturing, and bringing to life the sparks of divinity within us.

Teshuva — at its best — is a tool that enables us to both embrace honest self-critique and empower ourselves to do good in the world.

[as Mochiach] **Amen.**

Shabbat Shalom, Gmar Chatimah Tovah!

– Lee Bearson, *Shabbat Shuvah 5785*, 10/5/2024