



High Holidays 2021/5782

Rabbi Ain's Sermon - Rosh Hashanah Day 2: Does ReEntry Mean Returning?

Who will live and who will die? Who by fire? Who by plague? Who by hunger? Who by stoning? Who by loneliness? Who by wandering? And so on goes the Unetaneh Tokef, one of the most powerful, haunting, parts of our High Holiday liturgy, where we can't help but wonder, was this or will this be written about me? But we are told, Teshuva, Tefillah, Tzedakah-Return, Prayer, and Good deeds, will avert the evil decree. This notion, that with some crucial steps, maybe, just maybe, we can change the fate that appeared initially as our destiny.

In thinking about this prayer, this year, I am reminded of something that I once read: "Everyone of us has suffered a hurt that has robbed us of something much larger than the actual hurt itself. Just as a solitary pebble can cause an entire pond to ripple, a single painful experience can have far-reaching effects on our lives." And so wrote Rabbi Naomi Levy at the beginning of her book, To Begin Again.

This profound statement is something that needs to be said again, slowly, and pulled apart.

*Everyone of us
has suffered a hurt
that has robbed us
of something much larger
than the actual hurt itself.*

Let me be clear. Each hurt might be different. Each pressure point might be a unique experience for the individual involved. For each of us. Pain should not be compared. But whether it is falling off a bike as a child, not getting a job as an adult, losing a loved one, the ending of a meaningful relationship, the acknowledgment that we have been hurt, is something to say out loud.

Rabbi Naomi Levy continues-Just as a solitary pebble can cause an entire pond to ripple, a single, painful experience can have far reaching effects on our lives.

We can appreciate the image. The image of a small rock being thrown into a still pond, disrupting the imagined calm.

And yet, her conclusion is important-it can have far reaching effects on our lives. This, does not come with a negative description, rather, it is a statement of fact. For each hurt that we suffer, or quite frankly, each moment of joy, an experience will have far reaching effects on our lives.

There is no question that this past 18 months has been a moment, a period, that will have far reaching, far flung effects. There are so many that will impact the communities and the nations of this world. What will happen to so many children who lost so many opportunities to learn? What will happen to the families who said goodbye to loved ones over facetime, if at all? What will happen to those who were sick, feared for their lives? What will the impact be? We don't know yet. And unfortunately, we aren't completely out of the woods yet, despite how badly we want to be.

In thinking about impact of pain in our lives, i was moved by the following reflection by a young widow.



When you live through trauma, you become a changed person.

You no longer see the world the way your family, friends, and co-workers often do.

You evolve past petty disagreements and complaints of the norm into someone who sees's and feels more deeply.

Reintegrating into the world is challenging because you see life's actual value at its core. You have gratitude for the simplest joys of life, and that level of knowledge is widely accepted or understood.

You begin a search for meaning that can't be found outside through monetary means but only through a deep dive into oneself...

The key at this junction is continued growth....

The truth is, whatever trauma you have survived, it has happened, and there is nothing we can do to change the past. You have to take the necessary steps to heal yourself, mind, body, and spirit.

Once you begin to heal, you will intertwine the beauty of your new awareness and perspective and enter the world an enlightened soul who spreads much-needed hope for humanity.

...

Pain is inevitable, but forward progress is optional.

Look up above the darkness, and see the stars, a billion souls shining down on our continued journey.

...

Here is what we do know—we are coming back. We are returning. We are doing teshuva.

But we need to recognize that things might be different, there might be challenges, and there might be opportunities. Because that is what Judaism in fact offers.

In studying this summer with Rabbi Ed Feinstein, he reminded a group of rabbis that yes, in Judaism, we often talk about continuity—and we should. Moses received the torah at sinai we are taught and passed it to Joshua and eventually to the men of the great assembly, and as the rabbis say, Lo Bashamayim He, it isn't in heaven, rather it is here for us, to hold onto. AND YET, Judaism also has a narrative of discontinuity where there were events that necessitated a reinvention and a reinterpretation, but holding onto the values that have guided us for millenia. As he reminded us, the Tanakh was an outgrowth of the 1st exile, the Talmud was an outgrowth of the 2nd exile, Maimonides and his ideas developed out of conflicts with other cultures, and even Zionism, as a political movement came out of the failure of emancipation. Judaism has understood that we need to have the courage to see that what has gotten us here will not get us to where we want to be and we need to have the courage, today, to understand that.

So what does re-entry look like? What do we need to prepare ourselves for? What does it mean to re-enter, together?

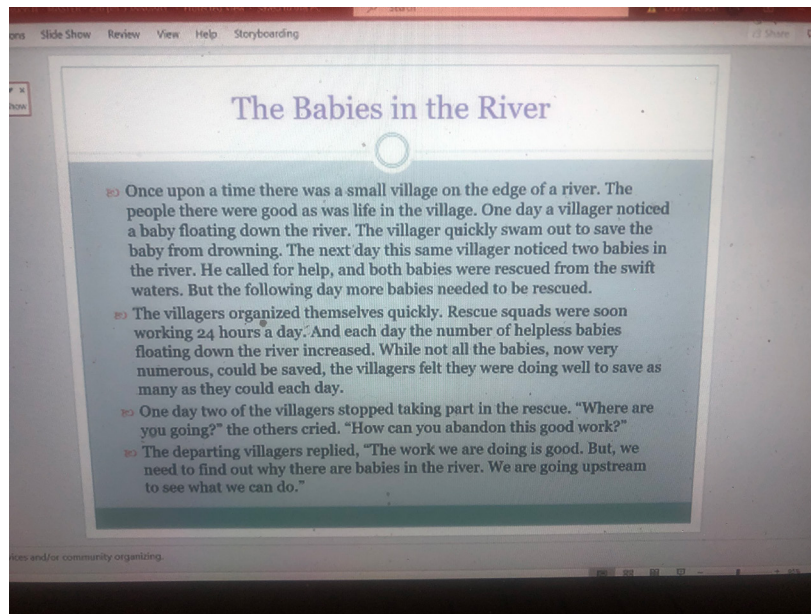
During Covid, I binge watched part of the show, **Manifest**. How many of you saw it? For those of you who didn't, Don't. It was ended mid season....but the premise was fascinating. In a nutshell, Manifest was a television series and it centers on the passengers and crew of a commercial airliner who suddenly reappear after being gone for 5 years. When they land in New York, the 191 passengers and crew learn that over five



have passed for everyone else while they were in the air, during which time they were presumed dead. As they rejoin society, the passengers begin to face the fact that their lives—and loved ones—are not the same as they were, since for them, it is the same day. What they realize though, is that upon “reentry” they have an opportunity to help make changes, for the better.

They had two ways of looking at this world—assuming that something was always going to be done to them, that they needed to respond to, and that the world they left was still there or, looking at the situation differently.

First, we might need to ask a profound question—if we aren’t able or we shouldn’t go back to just “what was” then what are we re-entering into? Is teshuva about where we have been or where we are going? And how will we figure it out? Let me share a story that might help us think about this...



Like in this story, where the person only focused at first on the bottom of the stream, just trying to make things better, I imagine that for the past year, we too have focused on getting through the days and getting through the weeks. I know, that for me, there was a period of time when it was like that. But the fact is, sometimes, we need to step back and then go upstream! If we want to re-enter, we can’t “return” just to what was, because that has changed. We need to appreciate that we are in a new space and not only have we changed, so have other people and we need to change the situation from the top, not just the result.

And, we will need to change our perspective if we want to accomplish something new. We can’t focus only on the challenges that we encountered, and let’s be real, there were different challenges for each of us—And it exposed for us the problems that are upstream—the difference in access to health care, the challenges of our educational systems, and so much more. We realized that there is much to work on but since we can’t do everything we need to find something.

In her book, *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* by Lori Gottlieb she reflects on her own private practice as a therapist alongside her own simultaneous therapy. In sharing about one of her patients, she told a story that caused me to think differently about moments that feel disappointing or worse, disorienting. She told a story about Julie. After Julie learned that she was dying, her best friend, Dara, was trying to be helpful and sent her a well-known essay, “Welcome to Holland.” Written by Emily Pearl Kingsley, it’s about the experience



of having your life's expectations turned upside down. She said that planning for one outcome but encountering another, unexpected one is like the following: It is like planning a fabulous vacation trip—to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your plans. You feel like you know exactly where you are going.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and you go. Several hours later, the plane lands and the flight attendant says, “welcome to Holland!” Holland? What do you mean Holland? I’ve been dreaming of Italy.

Well, there has been a change in the flight plan. The important thing is that they haven’t taken you to a horrible place, just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books and learn a new language. It’s a slower place than Italy but after you’ve been there for a while, you catch your breath, you look around, and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills. And tulips. And Rembrandts.

And first, this idea made Julie furious. There was nothing lovely about her cancer. But her friend, who had her own challenges in life, said that Julie was missing the point. She agreed that this was a departure, a change of expectations, but it was going to be up to her to decide how to live in this new place.

There is no question that there are often changes in flight patterns along the way. As supernatural as it was for the characters in *Manifest*, as challenging as it was for Julie and her cancer, and of course, none of us ever walk on a completely straight path. We might not realize there are curves in the way, but there are.

But this holiday season gives us an important path to walk on as we re-enter society, and it is the use of the word *teshuva*, which means return or repentance or reflection. It is important to take stock of where we have been to know where we will go. When we gather together next week for Kol Nidre, we will take a deeper dive into how we look ourselves, not just that we should.

So this morning, I want us to continue on this journey of examining the ripple effect of that stone that was thrown into a pond. What happens when the water shifts around us? Do we stand still or do we keep moving? And who is with us?

Amanda Gorman, the first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate, wrote in her poem, *The Hill We Climb*:

*When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade*

.....

*That even as we grieved, we grew
That even as we hurt, we hoped*

...

*So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be*

..

We will rebuild, reconcile and recover



*and every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid*

You see, she reminds us that we can take from where we have been and build something even better, even stronger. It doesn't mean forgetting what is behind us, or leaving the pain and the hurt, but as the ripples start to form, we see that the potential for what can be is incredible. It means, going to Holland instead of Italy. It means reminding ourselves that sometimes, the most important thing is to be able to see what will be not just what was.

And it means that If, and only if, we do it together can we hold each other up.

At the end of the book of Lamentations, the book of Eicha that recalls the deepest depth of our sorrow, we read,

*"Hashivenu Adonai eylekha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem"*Bring us back to you, O God, and we shall return, renew our days as they were before--does it really mean to go back to the "days of old"--is that really what we're asking for? Or does it mean that we should re enter our relationships, knowing that there is a changed sense of community and communal expectations

So how do we both return and renew ourselves? By entering this journey, together.

Professor Adam Grant wrote:

Psychologists find that in cultures where people pursue happiness individually, they may actually become lonelier. But in cultures where they pursue happiness socially – through connecting, caring and contributing – people appear to be more likely to gain well-being.

Happiness lives in the kinds of moments that we celebrated in the early days of Covid, when people found solidarity singing together out their windows in Italy, using dish soap to turn their kitchen floors into treadmills in Brazil, and clapping and banging pots with spoons to honor essential workers around the world.

The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, it may be time to create a Declaration of Interdependence. You can feel depressed and anxious alone, but it's rare to laugh alone or love alone. Joy shared is joy sustained.

And quite honestly, pain is also shared. Earlier this year I read *Group* by Christie Tate, a memoir of a young woman who entered into group therapy. While there were certainly scenes that would make me blush if I read them from this pulpit, the fact is, her experience that she shared was profound. She bore her souls to others. She was completely vulnerable. The only way she was able to re-enter into a place she felt good about was by being in a group. In a conversation with a friend about this book, my friend Sara said, it was so Jewish! Just think about how in Judaism we have witnesses to the most important parts of our lives and we pray in a minyan, a group when we need to mourn and when we need to celebrate. We might not come often but a way of re-entering into Jewish life can often be through prayer.

Which brings us back to teshuvah. Does it even work? Where will teshuva take us? In the last chapter of Mesechet Yoma, there is a debate between the rabbis--why, they ask, is repentance great? One says, it is



great because it brings healing to the world as it says, God will heal their backsliding. That when we find ourselves going to a place we didn't want, God will bring us back. Another rabbi says, Repentance is great for it reaches to the throne of glory—that when we engage in teshuva, when we make ourselves vulnerable, maybe we are able to have a deeper kind of access to God. A 3rd rabbi argues that even our sins are accounted as mere errors when we do teshuva. That making mistakes is a stumble, and it might cause a scar, like a ripple in the pond, but even when we fall, we can pick ourselves up. The sages continue to debate the different merits of repentance. The fact that there are so many reasons reflects that not each reason works. But in none of these cases, is return going back. We can't go back. There is no going back to before. Here is what I believe. When we Lashuv—When we turn, then we can LaShevet, we can dwell together. Like the words behind me, Hineh Mah Tov Umanayaim, Shevet Achim Gam Yachad. Normally and traditionally translated as, how beautiful it is when we sit together. But if we allow ourselves creativity with the sounds, we can also say, how beautiful it is when we return, renewed, together.