

Don't Sow Among Thorns: The Daily Work of Teshuvah Sustains Community
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For some people Yom Kippur is the most solemn, foreboding day of the year. We face our past mistakes, our regrets, our judgements. We engage in Teshuvah, turning away from sin. It doesn't sound very fun and I don't know why this would be the most attended service of the year if that's all it were about.

I think, by contrast, that the inspiration of Yom Kippur is that we all come together, from out of the woodwork, in all places and all generations to cohere around the intention of living well together into the New Year. It is the mass moment of community that draws so many in, not the mandate to look at mistakes, regrets and judgements.

In fact, there are teachings from our tradition that minimize the importance of this one somber day for the purpose of self-affliction.

Looking at self-affliction as thorns, the prophet Jeremiah says "You can't sow among thorns." What does this mean? Can you picture a thorny underbrush filled with bramble, prickles, poison ivy and nettles? Would you plant seeds in that kind of space? No, definitely not. The seeds of what is becoming will not be nourished by self-hate and oppression. You can't sow among thorns.

Years later, a Hassidic sage, Rabbi Zvi Elimech from Dinov, used the Jeremiah biblical quote "You can't sow among thorns" as the basis of a teaching about Yom Kippur and Teshuvah, the Jewish process of return that is a central theme of these holy days.

Rabbi Elimech taught that Teshuva is not a once-a-year thing that takes place just at the time of the High Holy Days. We have to prepare the soil all year. Don't wait till Yom Kippur, he said, Teshuvah has to be an on-going process. By Yom Kippur your heart should be like well-tilled soil. I love that. Your heart should be like well-tilled soil.

Furthermore, Rabbi Elimech says in beautiful language, "Most people think that the core of Teshuva is to fast and afflict oneself with various afflictions. Know my beloved, that this is a complete mistake. Because the Torah says nothing about this matter. The Torah only says 'You shall return to YHVH your God and hearken to the voice of The One.'"

Teshuva is not about afflicting ourselves, beating ourselves up, blaming or shaming ourselves. It is about learning more about our insides and about what tempts or in

these days we would say what triggers us and cultivating the practices that allow for a life and a community to thrive. Judaism is a religion of learning. We are people of the book, broadly understood as meaning that we are life-long learners and this learning needs to take place every day of our lives, not once a year.

In my talks this year I've been exploring the concept of Belonging since interconnection in community is at the heart of Judaism. When there is such a strong value on community, there has to be a repair process built in. Relationships can fray, communities can weaken, if Teshuvah is not built in. So in Jewish teachings there is a big emphasis on Teshuvah, on that process of repair and return, but it is not focused on one day of the year.

In the Talmud Rav Y'hudah asks How will we know if Teshuvah took place and someone has truly repented? He decided we will know when the person is presented with the exact same situation again, in his words from Yoma 86B, "With the same woman, with the same desire, in the same place." (Sorry for the sexism.)

But Rabbi Elimelech in more recent times thought that was stupid. You may never be presented with exactly the same situation ever again. And in any case you don't need a test, just reflect on your mistakes, learn from them and meet this new moment with a whole heart. You aren't being tested, you are being grown.

Elimelech quotes the powerful text that we will read tomorrow from Deuteronomy that says, paraphrased by me "respect and kindness for yourself and for others are not rocket science, they are exceedingly close, in your mouth and in your heart. You can do it!"

There is one couple I am close friends with that I hugely admire. They've been together for close to 35 years and as in all couples, they've been through ups and downs and navigated some hard times. But they have been life-long learners and now when one of them speaks to the other in a snappy somewhat harsh way, she'll almost immediately make the correction. She'll say "I didn't really need to say that in that tone of voice. I'm sorry." And the other one does the same. They do immediate repair with each other.

Anyone in any relationship can do this immediate, or soon-after, kind of repair. Teachers, Committee members, colleagues, parents, friends.

That's the Jewish practice. It is not about being perfect. It is not about once-a-year cleaning it all up. It's about a constant path of awareness, repair and return to the person you want to be.

There's the story about the guru sitting with equanimity, at peace, who is being interviewed on a T.V. show. The host says,
"You seem so calm all the time. How do you do it?"
The guru says, "I'm not calm all the time. I just recover quickly."

The hardest time to be the person you want to be is when you've been hurt. That's when the walls of defense go up to protect from harm. But the walls of defense also protect from love and care and growth and new opportunities. Our Holy Days give us a renewal of the Teshuvah practice of awareness and repair that we can take into every day of our lives. Teshuvah is relational, it's about you and yourself, you and your people, you and God.

And Judaism teaches that in this process called Life, we are held in God's infinite love. Our very yearning for God's love activates the flow of God's love and God's love activates our yearning. Psalm 27 says (in addition to the part we sing so frequently at this season that starts Achat Sha-alti.....)

My heart has said: I turn to seek You.
Your Presence is what I beg for.
Don't hide Your Face from me, don't just put me down,
You, who have been my helper.
Don't abandon me, don't forsake me, God, my support.

Our holy days allow us to fully feel this yearning for love, for wholeness, for a better world. We are surrounded by song and prayer and community to lift us into a new year of daily awareness, daily repair and daily walking the path we choose to be on.

Furthermore Rabbi Elimelech teaches, if you are ever confused about which way to go or what to do to clear out the gunk, give tzedakah and do mitzvot! The giving of tzedakah, that is money for justice, opens the blocked passages and allows the flow of Teshuvah to break through. The doing of good deeds, mitzvot, which he defines as visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, rejoicing at times of celebration, lifting up the poor and studying Torah, also opens the blocked passages and allows the flow of Teshuvah to break through. So if you are ever feeling stuck, give tzedakah and do mitzvot and something will change.

Life in community is not easy, it's hard to be human, these are hard times. We are so lucky to have these spiritual tools to nourish us, bolster us, guide us as we live lives together. Savor the gratitude, use the spiritual tools that are gifts from our tradition.

Shana Tovah. G'mar Chatimah Tova. A very good New Year. May each one of us and all the world be sealed into the Book of Life. Amen.