

Teshuva for the Young and the Not-So-Young

*Return again...return again...return to the land of your soul.
Return to who you are; Return to what you are; Return to where you are...
Born and reborn again...
Return again...*

These words, written and composed by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (of blessed memory) have set the tone for many modern High Holy Day services. It focuses on the Hebrew concept of *teshuvah*, which we understand to mean “repentance,” but literally means “return.” We also focus on this concept in the more traditional liturgy when we plead for G-d’s mercy, confidently stating that “*tefilah, tzedakah, v’teshuva* – prayer, charity and repentance – will temper a severe decree.”

If repentance and return are synonymous, to what are we returning? In Rabbi Carlebach’s song, we return to our soul and to our past, somehow starting over again. The slow, repetitive and pensive music he composed implies that this *teshuvah*, this return, is an ongoing, never-ending process.

As I mentally and emotionally prepare for this New Year, I’ve been thinking about the concept of return. Growing means moving forward, not backwards. We hope to grow and change for the better. We want to learn from our mistakes and become better people based on what we have learned. Where is there room for a return? The past is over; the future is now.

Yet sometimes I observe a child marveling at something new. I hear a question I’ve never heard before. I see that “aha!” look when a child “gets it.” I study with a bar or bat mitzvah student as he or she discovers an aspect of Torah I hadn’t before considered. And I think about the innocence of youth. We think there is nothing new under the sun, and every day, a child uncovers a new truth. The Bible’s poetic book of Ecclesiastes proposes, “There is nothing new under the sun,” suggesting that everything that happens now has happened before; we just forgot about it. I take issue with that statement. Every moment is new if we notice.

On Yom Kippur, we contemplate where we’ve sinned, how we’ve fallen short of complete goodness and innocence. Perhaps the return we long for is a return to the innocent purity of our youth. Return to remembering what it’s like to find something new, to learn something exciting and invigorating, which makes us want to shout “Wow!” Rediscovering the naivety we had when we assumed that each new person we meet is a potential friend, and not someone who might be out to get us. As children, we always seem to remember the Golden Rule; adults sometimes forget.

Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister and author, wrote:

All I ever really needed to know I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain but there in the sandbox at nursery school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.”

Our lives may be more complicated than the lives of five-year-olds. But there is certainly a lot of simple wisdom in the wonder of childhood that can lead us to a beautiful return, returning to embrace the wonder and newness of life.

Shana Tova – Happy New Year, 5786! I look forward to sharing it with you.

B'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon