

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur!!!!

This is the last Shabbat of the year, 5775. And we read the portion Nitzavim as we enter into the High Holiday season. The subject of the portion is appropriately thematic for this season – much of the portion deals with repentance. The concept of repentance is truly a revolutionary notion in religious thought. Somehow, we are given the opportunity to improve our relationship with God.

What drives a person to repent? This time of year the answer is clear; we go through a process when we are written and sealed into a year of blessing, health etc... And if we come into these days of judgement carrying the burden of sin, we are implicated in the heavenly court, God forbid. Repentance allows us to divest the negativity and the spiritually corrosive influences in our lives before standing in the presence of the Divine.

However, repentance is not a ten day a year process. Sometimes, people are motivated to repent, to make a major life reassessment when our life is shaken up. In a sense, this is Moshe's message in our portion: 'after all these things come upon you – these blessings and these curses...and you repent onto the Lord.' (Deuteronomy 30:1-2) The curses – and here we might substitute 'curse' for misfortune, tragedy, illness. We all experience, in our own ways and to our personal degree, moments of vulnerability and doubt which leave us feeling unmoored. What then? Where do we find a footing again? That is a time when we return to the eternal. The biblical language of God as 'my rock' connotes the trust and stability we find in turning to the Divine. *Teshuva*, repentance, literally means to return. We return to an inner stability as a way to combat the outer chaos.

But that very same verse offers another motivation to repent – a motivation which seems clear enough, but is strange nonetheless. Moshe says: "after all these things come upon you – these blessings and these curses...and you repent onto the Lord.' (ibid) Here the verse suggests that we repent because of the *blessings* that we experience. We commonly associate repentance with sin. The act of repenting in halachik language involves feelings of regret, apology, confession, resolve not to drop into negative patterns and assertion of future change. Repentance relates, in this model, to the undoing of a mistake or the righting of a wrong.

But Moses suggests that we repent because of our blessings. In the Torah's view, we experience blessing because of a consistency in our faith commitment and Jewish practice. What, then, would repentance look like if we were to repent when we experience abundance? Regret, apology and commitment to change would seem inappropriate expressions of repentance for the person who live uprightly.

The Or Hachayim on this verse highlights the different modes of teshuva, a theme noted in Maimonides' excellent work – the Laws of Teshuva – there is a Teshuva out of fear and a Teshuva out of love. The repentance of fear is a motivation which many of us focus on during the High Holiday season. The days of Awe are an apt description of this time. 'Who shall live and who shall die' is – for many – the mantra of our liturgy. The feelings of fear and regret and, sometimes, guilt and shame are part of a range of emotion of the season.

But the repentance of love – is a commitment that is altogether different from the repentance of fear. The repentance of fear is a return that we do begrudgingly; it's a repentance from the smallness of our minds and the shallower parts of the heart. But the return out of love stands at the apex of our aspiration. We would go there even if we knew we didn't have too; even if our lives weren't on the line. The Teshuva of love is our choice and conclusion from the breadth of our mind and the depth of our heart. And when our lives are filled with blessing – and still we choose to repent – that is the practice of teshuva that endures and makes a mark on our lives; it is an a culmination of life; an exclamation point rather than a question mark

This season, we come to synagogue for different reasons– for some –we come out of a fear or a sense of obligation or because of sentimentality, 'it's our tradition.' But how many of us come because it's the best place to be; a rare moment to unearth a piece of our neshama that we may have buried long ago; because Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are the first days of the year and an exclamation point on a life of aspiration that we continue to push onward and upward

May this be so and may we all be signed and sealed in the book of life and blessing for 5776

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach and Shana Tova Umetukah
Rabbi Menashe East