

## The Courage to Change

Rabbi Jacob Fine, Erev RH 5770

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read the story of the *akedah*—the well-known tale of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac. ***The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students what the hardest part of the akedah was for Abraham. The students answered what you might expect. One said, bringing Isaac to the altar. Another thought it was when Abraham raised the knife, another suggested the moment was when Isaac asked his father where the animal was to sacrifice, and so on. But the Kotzker rejected all of his students answers and explained that the hardest part for Abraham was actually coming down the mountain after the ordeal took place. Why was this the most difficult part of the experience for Abraham? Because, upon coming down he now had to live with what he had done.***

***Rabbi David Wolpe relates this teaching of the Kotzker to RH and YK. Wolpe teaches that the hardest part of the Days of Awe are actually not the 10 days themselves. Rather, the most difficult moment is actually the morning after YK—when we wake up and have to live with all of the commitments which we made and when we have the challenge of living true to the insights and yearnings which emerged from our honest self-reflections. It is the day after YK when the hardest work begins.***

As any of us who have ever made resolutions to change our behavior know---making the resolution is the easy part---it is actually making the change that is hard.

I want to invoke the Kotzker’s words at the very outset of our 10 day journey from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur—because it is critical that we take deeply to heart that our experiences over these Holy Days cannot exist independently from the rest of our lives. We should come out of YK with new insights and perspectives on our lives that inform how we want to live them. Our fervent praying, soul-searching and fasting over RH and YK is meaningless if we don’t come out the other end as transformed in some way.

**In what turned out to be his final interview before he passed on, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, by his own request, shared some thoughts with young people. As part of his words, Heschel offered an extraordinary image. He said, ‘Above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You’re not a machine. And you are young. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.**

We are, as Heschel imagines, each of us, works of art. Though we may at times fall prey to living stale, mechanical, ossified lives, we are not machines. We don’t have to be the same tomorrow as we are today. As the artists of our own lives, it is up to us to wisely select the colors and textures which will constitute our creation. The paintbrushes are in our hands.

These High Holy Days should jolt us from our complacency—to remind us that we must conduct our lives deliberately. If a painter is so intentional as to choose each new color only after calculated reflection —how much more so we should live our lives with intent.

We must live *on purpose*.

**My friend and teacher, Rabbi Shai Held teaches that ‘the greatest heresy in Judaism is to believe that the world *is* as the world must *be*.’** To resign oneself to the status quo—to suppose that realities cannot change-- is indeed as profoundly anti-Jewish as believing in multiple gods.

Abstractly, intellectually, we may believe that the world can change. We may be able to dream of a world where no one goes hungry. We may be able to imagine a day when Israel and its neighbors are finally living together in true peace.

But in the deepest recesses of our souls, do we know this to be true about ourselves? Do I truly believe that I can become as generous with my money as I would like to be? Do I truly believe that I can forgive my parents? Do I truly believe that I can become someone who can be counted on to follow through on my commitments?

In our heart of hearts, do we believe that we have the capacity to truly change?

Even as our tradition boldly insists that human beings have the capacity to change, to grow, to evolve—and even to totally reinvent ourselves—it is simultaneously acutely sensitive to all the reasons why personal change is so profoundly difficult for us to achieve.

In a fascinating, seemingly counterintuitive, Talmudic law, the Rabbis teach that, ***If robbers or usurers repent and of their own free will are prepared to return the stolen articles to the rightful owner, it is not right to accept them from them, and he who does accept them does not obtain the approval of the Sages.***

What?

To justify what appears on first glance to be a ridiculous position the Talmud tells the following story: ***It once happened with a certain man who wanted to return stolen property to its rightful owner that his wife said to him, Raca, if you are going to make amends and return everything that you stole, even the belt you are wearing would not remain yours. And for this reason, the man refrained altogether from repenting. It was at that time that it was declared that if criminals are prepared to return items to their rightful owners that it is not right to accept the stolen articles from them, and he who accepts from them does not obtain the approval of the Sages.***

In other words, in this case, the consequences of the man doing what was right and returning everything that he unlawfully possessed—would have been so great as to prevent him from living his life. So, despite his initial desire to change his ways, the man reverted to his previous corrupt behavior. With remarkable compassion and sensitivity, the Rabbis established a law that would allow individuals in this situation to make *teshuvah*—to mend their ways--but also to live their lives.

Let me offer another teaching in the same spirit that may be more familiar to many of us which again reflects remarkable sensitivity to the forces which make personal change difficult. The Mishnah teaches

that ***'Just as we can oppress others through business so too we can oppress them with words... For example, you may not remind a baal teshuvah—someone who has positively changed their life-- of their earlier deeds. BM 4:10***

This is extraordinary right?! You may not remind someone who has successfully effected sought after change in their life of how things used to be for them. And unfortunately, like so many of our most noble mitzvot, we struggle to live up to the standard our tradition sets for us.

Recently, close friends, after a long heart-searching process decided to leave the Jewish community of which they were a dedicated and beloved part and to move to another community. This move was motivated by their desire to live within a Jewish community more in alignment with their vision of the lives that they now wanted to lead. This was not an easy decision for this couple as they were deeply connected to the community they would be leaving behind. In their minds and hearts they were in no way rejecting their old community, they had no bad feelings or resentments—but were simply making a decision based on their natural evolution as people and as Jews. Their sincere goal was that they would continue to be deeply connected to their old community of friends—they had no intention of cutting ties.

To their deep disappointment and frustration, very quickly upon announcing that they were moving communities, this couple experienced negative feedback which manifested in a variety of ways. In some cases, they received sarcastic comments which, even if playful, conveyed disapproval. But more commonly, they describe that people have simply shut off to them. They are no longer treated the same way by many of their old friends and this has been very painful for them.

It seems to me that the intention behind each of these intriguing laws—both the injunction to not accept restitution from a repentant criminal and the prohibition against bringing up past behaviors to a person who has successfully achieved sought after change in their life—is the same. These decrees are meant to serve as protection for those who seek to effect change in their lives from those people around them who may consciously, or subconsciously, wish them to remain the same.

We are obligated to allow others the space to change.

We struggle when others around us make changes in their lives. We may feel threatened or rejected, feeling that the other person thinks that they are superior to use for choosing to live in a way that differs from our own. We sometimes feel jealous when we observe a friend who has managed to change him or herself in a way that we admire and would desire for ourselves. Our tradition recognizes the various impulses that would have us stunt the personal evolution of those around us.

And for many of us, far harder than allowing our loved ones the space that they need in order to change and fully become who they are, is the task of our allowing ourselves to. During this period of introspection, our task is to become acutely aware of the wide chasm that exists between the person who we are and the person who we seek to be. Hopefully, with honest self-reflection we can manage to identify specific behaviors, actions and in-actions that stand in the way of us living lives that truly

represent our deepest values and convictions. And yet, even when we have a vision of where we need to go—getting there eludes us.

How can we close the gap between who we are and who we need to be? What resources do we have to draw on to successfully make sought-after changes in our lives?

On Yom Kippur afternoon we read the famous story of Jonah—the man who tries to avoid God’s call and is swallowed by a fish. Ultimately, Jonah accepts his mission and goes to the corrupt town of Nineveh where, at the bequest of God, he proclaims that the people must repent or their city would be destroyed in 40 days. It does not take long for the people of Nineveh to heed Jonah’s warning and the whole city, humans and animal alike, quickly change their ways without hesitation.

With the people of Nineveh fasting and repenting, it appears that Jonah’s job is done. God is pleased with the people’s transformation and renounces His punishment. We would expect Jonah to be celebrating. But in a puzzling response Jonah remains distraught and leaves Nineveh’s limits and walks to an overlook where he could observe, ‘Mah yehiyah baeer’ ‘What will happen to the city.’

On first glance this seems to be a bizarre response. The people have made teshuvah, God has renounced his decree—why would Jonah wait around to see what would happen to the city?

My friend Rabbi Stuart Light helped me understand what is going on here. Until this point, Jonah has witnessed the outward appearance of tshuvah—of transformation from the people of Niniveh, but he is still not convinced that these people have truly changed their ways. And so he waits. Until 40 days pass Jonah holds his breath hoping that the people of Niniveh are able to sustain their transformation—lest they revert to past behaviors and cause the destruction of the city. But, Jonah reasons, if the repentant Ninivites are able to sustain their resolve for 40 consecutive days, then true transformation has taken place and the town will be safe for good.

What is special about the number 40? 40 is one of those “magic Jewish numbers” that appears over and over again in the Torah - 40 days of Noah’s flood – 40 days for Moshe on Mount Sinai, 40 years of wandering in the desert and 40 days of teshuvah for the people of Nineveh.

It would seem from each of these examples, as Rabbi Light pointed out to me, that the number 40 is not random but represents the amount of time necessary to give an act or a behavior a sense of permanence. It takes 40 days for a repeated behavior to stick—to become part of the fabric of one’s being. Had Moses stayed on top of the mountain for only 39 days, he might not have fully received the Torah. And Jonah knew that, before 40 days passed, the Ninevites were still liable to fall back on their corrupt ways of the past.

In the struggle to successfully effect change in our lives, Judaism’s greatest insight is the unparalleled power of habit. **Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit."** On this point, our sages agree with their Greek colleague. In our efforts to narrow the gap between who we are today and who we need to become—our Rabbis say—start acting today like the

person who you need to become and one day you will wake up and be that person. The key to personal transformation is strategic habitual action. **We are what we repeatedly do.**

God willing, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the 10 days in between, will feel meaningful, important and even transformative for all of us. During this time we have the opportunity to investigate the state of our souls and to discover what areas need attention and care. As the Kotzker Rebbe reminds us, the most difficult work will lie ahead when we are faced with fully integrating into our lives the insights of this season.

As a tool to help us in this work—you find under your seat a small card with 40 little boxes. If our tradition understands 40 days as the period of time that it takes for us to secure new behavior in our lives—perhaps we should give it a try? Between now and the end of Yom Kippur I invite each of you to identify one specific change which you want to establish in your life. Pick something specific and something that you can begin to work on immediately once YK has ended. Choose a behavior which you want to stop or a behavior that you need to begin. And once you have landed on your choice---try to stick with it for 40 days, from September 29<sup>th</sup> through November 7th. Then each day take a pen and mark off the day.

**Annie Dillard writes that "The way we spend our days is, of course, the way we spend our lives."** May we have the strength to spend our days ever striving to narrow the chasm between who we are and who we need to be. May we have the courage to live in accordance with our deepest commitments and may we all be inscribed in the book of life for health, happiness and for peace.

Shanah tova.

