

Dorshei Derekh 1st Day Rosh Hashanah 2023 D'var
The Teshuvah of Old Age
by Dick Goldberg

This morning I want to talk about *teshuvah*. It's Rosh Hashanah, the first of the ten days of Teshuvah. First, I'd like to spend a few minutes touching on the rich abundance of ideas about *Teshuvah* in our tradition, then share with you the process I engaged in that led me to decide not to talk about any of them. And finally, offer a new idea about *Teshuvah*— one that I feel is critically important to me and that I think may be so for many of you.

Teshuvah, like so many other concepts in our tradition, is open to a variety of interpretations and fertile ground for exegesis. As far as I'm concerned, another reason it's so wonderful to be Jewish. There are so many ways to do it. Close to a thousand years ago, Maimonides said the sound of the shofar was a wake-up call to our souls to arise from slumber, to search for ways to return in *teshuvah* and remember God!

What does it say about us that we need this wake-up call year after imperfect year? I think it says that we are broken. That we are mortal. That we are human. And need to return. To return— that, of course, is the kernel inside almost every exploration of the myriad forms of teshuvah. Turning back to something you've strayed or looked away from.

What a powerful notion! What work on your soul have you neglected? What important relationships have you left un-mended? What have you said no to for too long and now need to try to say yes?

How overwhelming!

A phenomenon distilled in the title of Rabbi Alan Lew's book, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. Prepared or not, the shofar is telling us, "Do it! Do the work and return to.... What?" There have been so many answers. One could argue that the Torah sees Teshuvah as principally a return to God. "Come, let us return to the lord," the prophet Hoshea tells the people of Israel.

In Psalm 51, King David seeks Teshuvah for committing adultery with Bathsheba. He begs to go back to God and says, "Against you alone have I sinned." Traditional rabbinical commentators ran with this notion and concluded Teshuvah was about confessing your sins to God. In the Mishnah and the Talmud, we are called on to engage in a process: introspection, behavioral changes, and asking others for forgiveness.

In the Kabbalah, the medieval mystics embraced a more cosmic vision of Teshuvah. They saw it as a dynamic force— one swirling all around us. To repent, find a way to tap into it. In the zohar, Teshuvah was seen as a way of repairing a rupture in the spiritual fabric of the universe. Not much of a leap to see that notion of Teshuvah as a form of Tikkun Olam, healing the world, no? Which is just what the great mystic rabbi Isaac Luria did.

There's Zionist teshuvah, I'll have you know— returning to the land of Israel, returning to a more cohesive sense of Jewish peoplehood. American teshuvah focuses on our penchant for revisiting and then re-inventing who we are.

And... I've just scratched the surface. There seem to be as many forms of Teshuvah as there are of love. Hmmmm, Teshuvah as love? I think that too has possibilities.

When I was thinking about what kind of Teshuvah I wanted to talk about today, I thought I might get a sign, a signal, if I returned to the parshah. I know that may seem a little strange. God will talk to me personally through the Torah and tell me what to say. How medieval. But it couldn't hurt.

Ok. Let's see. Let's look at an abbreviated version of the very first words we heard this morning. Genesis 21: "Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.

"Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. (Isaac— meaning one who laughs.) Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac—was born to him. Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' And she added, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'"

At first glance, no personal there there for me. I'm not 100, like Abraham. My wife didn't recently become pregnant and through some miracle have a baby. People aren't laughing at us— as far as I know.

But wait.

One should always sit with the parsha, no? Let it come to you. Let it enter you. Let it return to you. Reflect. I did... and then it hit me.

Like Abraham and Sarah, my wife and I are well past our child-bearing years. We didn't just have a baby, but our daughter Rosa, who had been away from Philadelphia for over 20 years, returned here last year, pregnant, thanks to a miracle – the miracle called IVF. And earlier this year, thanks to Rosa and the miracle, we had a grandchild, whom she named Zuri, "God is my rock." And every time I see Zuri, mostly what he and I do is smile and laugh. Close enough.

What's the personal message to me here? On what do I need to reflect? Return to? Perhaps what is vibrating in almost every verse of the parsha: being old. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age. Abraham was a hundred years old. Sarah said everyone who hears about this will laugh (likely implication: because she is so old). And she added, "Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Maybe the message for me here is, given where I am on the journey of life, that now might be the time for me to return to engaging in a more reflective and profound consideration of the implications not only of what is happening to me but also what needs to happen.

I know what you're thinking—those of you not on Medicare, "He's not talking about me. I'm not old."

True, but God willing, someday you will both become old and get parts A. and B. (plus a good supplement) – so you might want to think of this d’var as some notes for a trip you hope you get to take. And much of what I’m about to say is appropriate to almost any life stage, it just becomes more urgent in your later years.

And, of course, we have no idea how long a trip we’re on, do we? I love the way David ben Gurion once made that very point. On his 80th birthday, he was feted, and part of the celebration included a colleague’s making the traditional Jewish toast of wishing ben Gurion longevity: “Mr. Prime Minister, may you live to be 120!” To which ben Gurion replied, “Who are you to limit my life?”

Another way of saying, *We just don’t know how long this show’s gonna run.* But for now, it’s running. And we’ve got things to do. According to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson the most important psychosocial work in late adulthood is to maintain ego integrity— to hold on to your sense of wholeness, while avoiding despair. He was talking about looking back on your life with some sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Accepting yourself. Attempting to address the harms you may have caused. Forgiving others who you feel may have harmed you.

And when we talk about forgiveness here, we’re not talking about “pardoning” those we feel may have wronged us. We’re talking about letting go. Letting go, as Rabbi Rami Shapiro said, “Of oneself, thus allowing pain received and sustained, hurt inflicted and imposed, to settle, and the true self to rise.” In other words, letting the dross of bitterness fall to the bottom of the pot, allowing the gold of your soul to ascend. Returning to a more essential you.

Returning and resuming your efforts to be a better and perhaps even purer, you— one not burdened with the emotional detritus that you may have allowed to cling to you for too long. Finding ways of clearing out some of the envy, bitterness, and regret in your psychosocial larder. Engaging in a complex and multifaceted process that I think you might call the Teshuvah of old age.

Like many of you, thinking about your aging body and soul may have been something you’ve been doing for quite a while. Perhaps a daily activity. I’m saying now might be a time to go deeper. Push harder. Clearly, one of the drivers for the Teshuvah of old age is a recognition that one kind of return is ever more imminent. A return to the earth. Reminders of that phenomenon abound.

As we age, more and more friends and family members become ill and die. The minyan has had a good number of heavy and sad reminders of that phenomenon this year. And a late life child, as it was for Abraham and Sarah, or a late life grandchild, as it was for Debbie and me, is also a reminder. To be sure, it was and is a blessing. But if you’re elderly, realistically how long can that blessing last?

Will I be there for the B’nai mitzvah? Maybe. High school graduation? Could be. When they get their Ph.D.? Not so likely. The birth of great grandchildren? Who am I kidding? The gates may not be slamming shut—or maybe they are—but they’re definitely closing. That fact, it seems to me, should hasten a return – a return to the serious work of being reflective about who you are at this point in your life. And what you might do about it.

When you hear the blast of the shofar this year, then, you might think of it as a wake-up call to do this necessary work before physical illness, cognitive decline or death mean that you can’t. How to do it?

I looked to the Torah to see whether it might offer any insights. In Genesis 24, Abraham is described as one who "grew old and came along in days." "His accumulated days," according to the Lubatchiver Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson, "his accumulated days, each rich with learning and achievement, meant that with each passing day his worth increased. Thus, a ripe old age," Schneerson said, "is regarded as one of the greatest blessings to be bestowed on humankind." I took the Rebbe's insights as a confidence booster, suggesting that I might have the capacity for doing this work.

The torah also repeatedly enjoins us to consider old age a virtue and a blessing. It sees "old" as synonymous with "wise." Tells us we should respect all elderly, regardless of their scholarship and piety, because the many trials and experiences that each additional year of life brings to us yield a wisdom which the most accomplished young prodigy cannot equal.

I'd like to push that a little further. Forget, for the moment, the liabilities inherent in old age. Focus on the skills, knowledge, life experience we have, the potential capacity to embrace a more expansive, nuanced, and generous world view. You could, then, see this time of life, as simply having the potential, to borrow a phrase from the Jewish sage Stephen Sondheim, for being "better and stronger and deeper and nearer and simpler and freer and richer and clearer." When I come to understand something that is new to me, when I solve a thorny problem, that's how I feel.

Note to pre-old: don't you feel something like that too when you embrace a new understanding? Get to the other side of a difficult challenge? And what could be newer to me than this life stage? What could be thornier than coming to terms with— and trying to make sense of— a long, complicated, emotionally complex, but unfinished life. But how – how do you do this teshuvah?

I think an assets-based approach might be a good way to start. Maybe begin by asking yourself or discussing with a loved one, "where did I go right?" In *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared*, the text I mentioned earlier and one that many of us turn to during Elul, Rabbi Alan Lew asks us to experience broken heartedness and open our hearts to God. I'm suggesting that to do the work of the Teshuvah of old age you also need to ask yourself: how are you prepared?

Below the signature line of the emails I get from many friends is a quote from Mary Oliver's poem, *A Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? At this time of life, I'm suggesting you also ask yourself: what have I done with my one wild and precious life? What have I done that worked? What are the strengths you have for going forward—when for various reasons, you will likely really need those strengths.

Earlier this summer, Betsy Teutsch gave a d'var to the minyan in which she said, "We need to recognize what we have done correctly to motivate us to keep on doing it, and doing it even more." That resonated with me, and I felt owning such a recognition might become an arrow in my quiver for the work I'm talking about now. She also shared with us a positive vidui—the confession-- written by Rabbi Avi Weiss that I think could help us craft the skills sections of our resumes as human beings. It begins with:

We have loved,
We have blessed,

We have grown,
We have spoken positively.

Might now not be a good time to ask and answer the questions? - Where have you loved? Where have you blessed? Where have you grown? Where have you shown compassion? Where have you been empathic? Where have you contributed? Where have you repaired? Don't you want more of that in the next phase in your life? Might it not help build the foundation for the house in which you want to dwell going forward?

Another big question you might want to ask yourself: "Who am I really?"— not "Who does the world think I am?" What's the dissonance between who you are and how you are perceived? Is now the time to try to bring those two phenomena more in line? A wholesale divulgence of your true self could be incredibly disruptive, but might you test the waters here and come out a little— in a way likely to become more of your genuine self and enrich and deepen relationships?

If you have a partner, what more do you have to give them? Debbie and I have been married 53 years; we started dating right after she became a bat mitzvah. According to psalm 92:10, the length of our days is seventy years—or eighty if we are strong. So, we're talking about almost a lifetime together: adolescence, young adulthood, marriage, two children, a fifty-year work life, the aforementioned grandkid and two others.

Just think of the history and complexity—years of delight and imperfection. Enough for an updated version of "remembrance of things past." But not over. And still requiring presence and intention—and possibly upgrades in the ways to be a loving spouse.... I'm speaking for myself only here.

If you're a parent, what more do you have to give your children? What do they want? What do they need? What might they want that you have no intention of giving them? What's your bandwidth? What more can you give the rest of your extended family, your community, the world? What, at this time, do you really want to give yourself? How can you help repair your world? Make good trouble?

You could spend a lot of time answering these questions— doing the Teshuvah of old age. Maybe start by biting off what looks good —or essential —then make a meal of that. Or sit for a moment and let it come to you— I'm a big fan of doing that— let it come to you, what the most critical issues are in your life at this time. I guess that's not only the Teshuvah of old age. Maybe it's the Teshuvah of life.

We are encouraged in Psalm 118:24 to see each day as a rich and precious gift from God, filled with new opportunities. "This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Maybe one way to be glad in it is to seize the opportunity to try to come to know and accept who we are, change what we can, while we still have time, and leave what is immutable on the table.

Do those of us in this life stage have the resources, the goods, the strength, the *sechel* (the smarts) to do this? No less than Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century Rabbi and philosopher, said we do. "May I suggest that man's potential for change and growth" he wrote, "is much greater than we are willing to admit, and that old age be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth."

Inner growth. Perhaps that's the payoff for performing the mitzvah of the Teshuvah of old age. But Heschel went further: "The years of old age," he said, "are indeed formative years." Did you ever think of old age as formative? "Rich," Heschel said, "in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness." From his mouth. And with your effort.

"As we grow older, we are more and more acutely aware of the finitude of our time," our own Rabbi Dayle Friedman tells us in her wonderfully comprehensive book, *Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older*. "We know," she says, "that this present moment will not come again, and cannot know how many more days, months, or years will be ours to live. Thus it becomes ever more urgent that we consider carefully how we are going to spend our time."

I would argue that some of that time might be spent on the work of the Teshuvah of old age. Both the in-depth personal exploration and the actions we might take suggested by that exploration. In the introduction to her book, Dayle includes what she calls a blessing for the path, her own translation — rhymed, mind you— of Psalm 92: 15-16

May we grow fruitful as we age
Ripe and abundant and... sage
Keep our hearts open to all we face
Present to goodness— even a trace
Renew us, let our spirits soar
Sustain us, our rock, for more.

More.

Essentially, a prayer to see this time of life as a time of growth... openness. A time to see the thread of sweetness and goodness in a perhaps otherwise worn and rough fabric. A time to reflect and seek wholeness. A time to be re-invigorated and joyous. A time to return to— and even if you cannot finish the work— not desist from it.

I'm very drawn to this idea about who I might be in this time, keeping my heart open, bringing in joy, delighting in abundance, returning to... A time when I eschew regret and embrace acceptance. A time when life is stronger and deeper and nearer and clearer.

And perhaps if I'm lucky...

Like Sarah, to live a life that is blessed with the sound of laughter. Good laughter.

May we all live to be 120! Or more. Amen.