

## **PHYSICS, HOLLYWOOD, TESHUVAH AND ME!**

*Rosh Hashanah 5771 — Thursday, September 9, 2010*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas*

*Sermon by Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner*

It's fall! For some of us that means backpacks, new shoes and homework, for others it's the leaves bursting into fiery color, the crisp smell of evening and of course football! Canadians are thinking hockey.... still of others it is the end of summer hiatus in Hollywood and its time for the new fall TV line up. Yes, It's always exciting! Ads pop up on the Internet, there are U-Tube teasers, Billboards, and flyers stuffed in your newspapers, TV and radio spots teasing and tempting you.... and we struggle! Should I watch the new shows like NBC's The Event or ABC's No Ordinary Family? Or should we stick to our favorites like Glee, Big Bang Theory or So you think you can Dance?!

Now I watch the bulk of my television late at night, as I ready myself for bed. And one show that I've often enjoyed is a kooky-comedy called "My Name is Earl". It premiered in September 2005 and ran through 2009 and stars Memphis Beat's Jason Lee. For those of you who may not be big TV buffs, the plot of the show goes like this: Ne'er do well, Earl wins \$100,000 in the lottery but loses the ticket, he lands in the hospital after being struck by a car, and then finds out that his wife is leaving him for someone else. As Earl lies in his hospital bed, faced with his mortality, he realizes that something has gone terribly wrong with his life. Suddenly, while watching TV he has an epiphany ...he must change the course of his life, but can only do so by first taking responsibility for his actions.

So Earl makes a written list of everyone he has harmed in the past and each episode of the series focuses on Earl attempting to right his past wrongs. In doing so, Earl learns a lot about himself and grows in self-awareness.

How many of us can identify with Earl in the thought that if only we could just have a do-over, change a few things here and there, take a different stand or choose a different path, restate something we said to someone, then just maybe life would somehow be better?

Holy Days are the time when we gather with family and friends in the synagogue, to catch up on their lives and to review our own. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the new year, and more so the beginning of a ten day period of self-examination culminating with Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, the day of "at-one-ment" Yom Kippur. During this period we turn within ourselves to find answers; The call of the shofar, the blasts that we experienced this morning was a call to harkens us to the Divine summons to examine our hearts, and to plead our case, for the life that we have created- it is a process that when sincerely embraced is courageous for it requires honest work in self-judgment.

Our tradition teaches that human beings are moral free agents, responsible for our own choices and decisions. We believe that our destiny and that of the whole

world depend upon the choices that we make. Judaism sees the world as a web of relationships: our relationship with God and our many relationships with other people. The health or brokenness of these relationships can and do impact many factors both directly and indirectly connected to each other and our world.

It is the nature of relationships to ebb and flow. There are good times and there are challenging and even bad times. There are times of intimacy and closeness and times of alienation and distance. We know this dance to be true in our relationships with other human beings and theologically we see this played out between God and humanity in our sacred narrative, in Torah and our prayers. As intelligent adults, we know that in order for any relationship to remain strong, it must be nurtured, and that requires on-going evaluation and occasional recalibration when things are out of kilter.

As our TV hero Earl discovers, to rectify any relationship that has gone awry there is the need for sincere repentance, we call it teshuvah and in some cases atonement (kapparah). Hurts must be recognized, given voice, mistakes repaired or resolved in order for healing to occur and a relationship to resume in a healthier manner. Repentance then is the key to realigning relationships that are off track.

You may be thinking, “that’s lovely New Year rhetoric but its much more complex than a Hollywood’s quick-fit method”. The truth be told, yes, it is difficult to reshape our attitudes. We want to think well of ourselves, but our egos are fragile, and our self-image less sturdy than we often revel to the world.

Crises of inner confidence can be triggered by a bad day at work, or a sharp remark by a loved one, a stumble on the path of life may focus us upon unrealized hopes or desires. And tragedies can certainly shake our very being to the core. Holding on to our comfortable patterns of behavior- positive or negative, tend to make us feel safe. In other words, change can be uncomfortable and even scary because it tends to want your present existence to be stable and continue to be as it has been so far. This is one of the challenges of living life, and it is one of the key themes of our Holy Day process and prayers- to shake us up out of our regular patterns so as to return to our better selves, not simply to continue living the same patterns- another way of putting it is this way- Teshuvah takes us out of our comfort zone.

Holy Days are about taking an annual accounting of our lives, figuring out what needs changing, or fixing, breaking out old habits in order to recommit to a meaningful life, a life worth living.

In an article published a few years ago in RJ Magazine on Jewish liturgy, we are reminded of the powerful images found when reciting the Uetaneh Tokef prayer, said on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In it we acknowledge the power of this time in our lives, in our year- and the awesome and often fearful task in front of us- that of holding up the mirror to our souls- to assist us with the frightening task, we are presented with a theological concept of God examining and judging our behaviors and acts, or lack there of...There is the metaphor of the opening of the book of life and death, with each of our names listed.

The prayer offers beautiful contrasting images—the thundering blast of the great shofar, calling us to awaken from our dulled state of being (u'shofar gadol yitkah) juxtaposed with the (kol d'mah'mah dakah yishmah), the still small voice of God heard within the powerful whirlwind of chaos of everyday living...we imagine ourselves passing one by one before God, to be reviewed, critiqued...judged. And then comes the recitation of the providence of all who are inscribed...the words that echo through our souls, regardless of our individual believe in a high power or not...but speak to our human condition....who shall live and who shall die...be it physical or metaphysical...who am I?, What am I? Has my life been significant or have I wasted the opportunity for rich meaningful relationships?!? And just when we think there is no time left, we reach the words... “u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah ha-gezeirah” – repentance, prayer and acts of goodness and charity may lessen the sever decree.

This statement is the great counterpoint to the fates; the pronouncement of our having free will over the quality of our life, our ability to change our ways and impact the meaning of our lives through our varied relationships. In paraphrasing Midrash Tanchuma it states God does not predetermine whether a person shall be righteous or wicked; that- God leaves up to us to chose or change.

This transformative power, a power through which one enters into an entirely new kind of existence is born from the divinely given gift of free will. We are taught that Torah gives birth to a person, so to speak; prayer takes one entirely out

of one's own existence and brings one to face with the Divine; *teshuvah* changes one's status from that of a flawed person to that of a righteous human being, an “esh”- in relationship with “sacred-other”.

According to Professor Susan Handelman of Bar-Ilan University “the essential change from one form of existence to a new one is a kind of quantum leap, to be sure. But this new existence itself needs to be developed and perfected, and requires the extension of the self to become more firmly established...”

We can never entirely know the extent to which our own actions influence anything; yet we must have fortitude to strive daily to perfect ourselves, our families, our community, the world. Our tradition teaches that what we do brings meaning, because how we conduct ourselves today, influences the future—this way of engagement makes each and every one of us uniquely important. Therefore, every act of reconciliation is holy soul work, every kind word spoken, or generous expression of assistance has its influence. It's like the butterfly effect found in chaos theory; namely that small differences in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system. In other words, it does matter if you have hurt someone or damaged a relationship or have to the contrary repaired some brokenness, because that which you enact, will have an effect somewhere, at sometime.

How do we go about creating this positive change in our state of being? Its teshuvah- returning to our better states of being, and the rabbis understanding

human nature created a formula for doing the work of teshuvah- moving ourselves from the potential to the actual.

First, we must all see ourselves as Earls, making our list, determining what it is that we wish to repair, to change or to begin anew. The word teshuvah, repentance also means, “answer”, which suggests that one must first ask the question, where have I missed the mark? Where am I making a wrong turn? Hence the sages taught that the process of doing teshuvah involves examining our behaviors, roles and patterns of living to best determine which parts we need to let go and which parts need strengthening.

The medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote extensively on this topic of perfecting the self, but for simplicity he articulated four specific steps for doing teshuvah- the Teshuvah for Dummies manual, if you will.

- 1) Teshuvah is always ongoing but we all need one place to start, so stop banging your head against the wall and Stop- take a time out to think- and find clarity. What is it that I what do? How can I recalibrate myself in order to change enough to make right what is broken?
- 2) Regret: To make transformational change, one needs to sincerely want to do so. Do I regret the actions that I have previously taken? Or am I just telling him or her what they want to hear, just to find some peace....Am I ready to really “own” these actions, and take

steps to “right the wrong”?

- 3) Verbalize: Stating our regret aloud. In the privacy of ones thoughts on a walk or sitting here in prayer, mentally state what it is that you have done or what to change. Ask for the strength to do the work that needs to be done. Then reach out to the one you have wronged, sharing your regret. If they are gone...go to a safe place or person to whom you can articulate the thought aloud. Give yourself permission to forgive yourself and find solace. Our asking for forgiveness is not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because it frees our hearts so we can move forward in life.
- 4) Sticking power: When faced with the same opportunity will you act differently? If you were to relive the exact circumstances will you be strong enough to make a different choice? Teshuvah is the clear resolve to abandon past errors and to help yourself grow. If you know that certain things “push your buttons”, figure out a plan for dealing with the issue so as to act differently the next time. Remember, we live in community for a reason, seek help if you need the support!

Hollywood wasn't so far off in the creation of the character Earl, for he is truly all of us.... a regular guy, just trying to live his life, and awakening to the fact that he could choose a better way of engaging in his life through his relationships with others.

C.P. Snow, the English physicist and novelist, described this process when he wrote, "The ideal of Know thy self, is best practiced when man who takes the trouble to know himself, is appalled, and then seeks forgiveness." Our Jewish process is exactly this. To face ourselves, to face the one we've hurt, to say I'm sorry, and to be truly transformed. It is hard-and yet it reflects the sacred ideal of engagement beyond one's ego and living life in true partnership with humankind.

Getting started with this work is often the hardest part, so I invite you to join me in beginning the work of teshuvah. On the tables outside the social hall, along with your apples and honey, I have placed writing paper and envelopes. During these days of Awe, find a moment in solitude and make your plan. Write yourself a letter, compose a prayer or if that seems too overwhelming, jot down a few bullet points of things that you want to work on this year, think about the relationships that need nurturing, or list the people or person with whom you desire to seek out.... ask yourself "How can I make teshuvah", "What is the prayer for my life?" or "When I look into the mirror, how do I wish to see myself at this time next year?"

Put your note into an envelope, seal it and mark *do not open until September 2011*. Tuck it away in a safe place, or return it to me in a self-addressed envelope on Yom Kippur. I will hold on to these private letters until next year when they will be mailed back to you. This simple act can serve as a powerful tool in the work of teshuvah. Remember Maimonides rule number #1, teshuvah is on-going.

I offer you the following blessing and pray that it will resonate with your soul as you process the Holy work ahead:

Dear God, I am good at making resolutions, but I have not been good at keeping them. There are so many goals I would like to achieve, so many changes I would like to make.

I pray to you this day, for strength. I want to live a life of meaning. Help me God to see. Show me the person I have the potential to become. Teach me to resist temptation, to conquer self-doubt and self-destructive habits. Help me to overcome selfishness and pettiness. Give me the humility and the courage to repair relationships that pride has destroyed. Show me how I can bring hope and healing into this world.

Oh God, May this year be a good year. May it be a year of self-growth and healing, one of health and blessing, a year of love, and year of peace!.... Amen

Teshuvah is so much deeper than simply taking time once a year to say I'm sorry, this is what we tell our babies. As adults, we know better, Teshuvah is about returning, to come back to our better higher selves. When we read in our prayer books, "vechotem yad kol adam bo"- we each sign our name in the book-the sefer hayim- the book of life, we are being proactive in choosing the quality of our lives. We may not have control over how we die, but we do have some choice over how we live, how we act and interact with one another. We when we seal our letters, we seal our intentions for pursuing life in relationship with life.

We the members of this holy community, this day, stand together and face God, taking responsibility for who we are ...and we can have an effect on who we will be if only we take the opportunity. This was Earl's choice...to chose life.....Will you do the same?

---

<sup>i</sup> Prayers of Rabbi Naomi Levy