**Erev Rosh HaShanah 5783: Reminding Ourselves Who We Truly Are**

**Kehillath Shalom Synagogue**

**Rabbi Lina Zerbarini**

Shanah Tovah. Welcome to the first of the Ten Days of Teshuvah.

These are the times that try men's souls, wrote Thomas Paine nearly 250 years ago.

Indeed, these past years have been very difficult.

Nature:

Global Pandemic

Climate Change

Society: We seem to be behaving our worst:

Destroying the planet

War

Demonizing each other

Starving people

There are even serious people discussing the likelihood of Civil War.

Personally: In our own community, many are struggling with aging and health – their own and their loved ones.

Over these High Holidays, I will reflect on different aspects of these hard times and share some hope and comfort and guidance that the tradition offers.

Our Lunch & Learn class has been reading Mordecai Kaplan’s 1937 guide to creating a meaningful and useful contemporary Judaism in which he wrote:

“What more important function can religion have than to serve as antidote to the harm that the evil in the world might do to our personalities?” p. 16

These times, these years, can, and have, had negative impact on our souls. Our isolation, our fear, our anger at the state of politics in our country, our helplessness in the face of war and drought and famine, all affect us.

It is so easy to lose ourselves in the face of all this. To cynicism. To despair. How do we stay connected to ourselves in the face of all the pain and sorrow?

Our Jewish tradition has wisdom for strengthening our souls. I began by welcoming us to the first of the Ten Days of Teshuvah. Teshuvah is often translated repentance, but literally means “return.”

In a moment we’ll look at what we’re returning to, but first, and perhaps most essential:

An ancient Midrash from the Talmud teaches that **teshuvah is one of the things created even before the world itself** (along with the first set of tongs for firing metal, because how can you make tongs to do that without tongs?).

Teshuvah existed prior to the world – and it also existed before people, and before any of our mistakes. So teshuvah as repentance is a limited understanding of the concept. Teshuvah is something intrinsic to the world – it is not merely a passing episode of something we do annually, or when we mess up; rather, it is a foundation of the world, and, perhaps, a foundation of our lives.

Indeed, in this vein, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav wrote:

Before engaging in teshuvah a person **does not yet have being**; it is as if they do not yet exist in the world…but when one sets out to …engage in teshuvah, they embody the quality of *ehyeh*. They are ready to exist in the world, as if to say: “**I am ready to become**” (LM 1:6).

***Ehyeh*** – you might recognize this word from God’s words to Moses at the Burning Bush. Moses asks God for God’s i.d. – what shall I tell them your name is? God says: “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,…you shall say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”

**Ehyeh – I am ready to become.**

This is God’s name, and God’s essence. This is Teshuvah. This is the foundation of the world.

But *how* do we engage in Teshuvah? How do we care for our souls? How do we become?

Back to Kaplan: “What more important function can religion have than to serve as antidote to the harm that the evil in the world might do to our personalities?” – MGMJR, 16

Our tradition, from our wise ancestors, gives us the concept of Teshuvah and then stories and structures – like the Torah and these Ten Days of Teshuvah - through with to enact and understand it. And then, hopefully, we will use these tools to grow.

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, understands a story of Moses to teach about Teshuvah.

After the incident of the scouts, when 12 leaders did reconnaissance of the Promised Land, 10 of them came back saying: it’s great, but there’s no way we can conquer it, and frightened all the people, who wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt. God was so frustrated with the people that, once again, God wanted to destroy all of them and start over with Moses (kind of a throwback to what God did already with the flood).

Moses talks God down (and not for the first time), but does something different here. In this case, Moses says:

Therefore, I pray, let Adonai’s forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying, ‘Adonai! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; ….Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.” Numbers 14:17-19

What did Moses do here? Moses asked for God to be strong in the face of this disappointment, using God’s own description of who God is, invoking *middot ha-rachamim*, the generous and forgiving aspects of the Divine, reminding God of God’s own essential nature: Adonai, slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; …(Numbers 14: 18)

Moses reminded God of who God is.

This, says the Sefat Emet, is **a great moment of teshuvah**. Moses here redeems the people from God’s anger and disappointment. Not through argument, but through reflecting back to God who God really is, what kind of mercy God is really capable of. It is not becoming of you, Divine and Compassionate One, to act so cruelly, Moses seems to say. Let your strength, your compassionate restraint, show. Be a better You.

This language of this reminder will sound familiar to you – we recited these words at Selichot, and in the Torah service today. And we will recite them several times on Yom Kippur.

ה’ ה’ אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת, נוצר חסד לאלפים נושא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה

*YHVH, YHVH, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, bearing iniquity, transgression and sin, and acquitting....*

Why?

Let’s remember where these words came from. Back in the book of Exodus, **God actually taught Moses this very formula.** Not long after the Divine (again) threatened destruction of the Jewish people on account the sin of the Golden Calf, God revealed the “forgiveness prescription," the recitation of these 13 Attributes of Mercy, to Moses.

Years later, Moses employs the formula and, indeed, it works! In the next verse, God said: “‘I pardon as you have asked’” (Numbers 14:20).

But why does this formula work? What about it is so effective?

The “formula” reminds God of who God really is. And maybe, as well, it reminds us who we really are.

In his book, The Lights of Teshuvah, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook writes:

“When we forget the essence of our own soul… everything becomes confused and in doubt. The primary teshuvah, that which immediately lights the darkness, is when a person returns to [them]self, to the root of [their] soul – then they will immediately return to God, to the soul of all souls.”

We are not our best selves when we forget the "me", whether as individuals or as a collective.

Rav Kook brings another sacred story, that of the first “sin,” which, according to the Talmud, took place on Rosh Hashanah. He said: the human’s problem was that they became estranged from themselves, they yielded to the snake's opinion, and lost themselves. So when God called to the Human(s), איכה, where are you?, They could not answer the question because they didn't recognize their own souls, because the real sense of self was lost from them….

Adam and Eve didn’t know who they were. They had lost themselves.

And we see that in their attempted defense: he blames the woman, she blames the snake, they both blame God. They, themselves, are nowhere to be found. In *this* story, there’s no one to remind them of who they are.

But Moses knew the formula and how to use it. God not only forgives immediately, but then says: “as I live and as Adonai’s Presence fills the whole world” (Numbers 14:21) – which the Talmud interprets as God saying to Moses: you have given Me life with your words” (BT Berachot 32a).

This isn’t just a story about Moses and God. This is about us.

When we are reminded who we are, when we are able to return to our true, authentic, and best selves, we embody the quality of Ehyeh. We become.

This is what it means to do teshuvah. To return to ourselves and the Divine Spark in each of us. Discovering, or rediscovering, who we are and what our mission is in this world.

Some of our Teshuvah is personal, individual. In our own quiet time. In our writing, our yoga, our walks, our quietly observing the birds in the yard, our prayer.

But Teshuvah might also be found in community. Our friends, our family, our spouses – some know us better than we know ourselves. Some see what we cannot. Might we be open? Might we ask, and teach each other what we need? Might we help each other manifest qualities of compassion and generosity rather than anger and reactivity?

The formula that God taught Moses could become our formula as well:

*YHVH (Ehyeh – Being), YHVH (Ehyeh – Being), a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, bearing iniquity, transgression and sin, and acquitting....*

We are here to remind ourselves of who we are, who God is, who we might be to each other, and, ultimately, what the world might be. Ehyeh. I, we, will become. We will become our beautiful, unique, infinitely valuable selves. May it be so. Shanah tovah.