



## **Yom Kippur Alternative Service Sermonette 5772/2011**

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“Self-T'Shuvah – Returning to Ourselves”

There was once a parrot who learned from his misdeeds!

This parrot treated his owner with disdain. He insulted her and every time she tried to pick it up, he would peck at her arm.

One day she got fed up with the parrot and as he was insulting her she picked him up, opened the freezer door, threw him in and closed the door. From inside, the parrot was still going on for about 5 seconds and then it was suddenly quiet.

She thought, "Oh no, I killed it!" She open the door and the parrot just looked at her. She picked it up. Then the parrot said:

"I'm very sorry. I apologize for my bad behavior and promise you there will be no more of that. From now on, I will be a respectful parrot."

"Well OK" she said. "apology accepted". The parrot said "Thank you". Then he said, "Can I ask you something?" She said, "Yes, What?"

And the parrot looked at the freezer and asked, "What did the Chicken do?"

That parrot may have learned the hard way to change from his insulting manner, but hopefully we can look at past experiences as teachers for how we should move forward.

During these "*Aseret Y'mei T'shuvah*" – these "10 Ten Days of Repentance" between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, many of us engage in the process of *t'shuvah*. We consider our sins and misdeeds, we ask others for forgiveness and then we ask God for forgiveness. We try to do better as we move into the future.

But if that's all we do in doing *t'shuvah*, we've missed one essential relationship – our relationship with ourselves.

During the High Holy Days we do a lot of self-examination, but we also need to do *self-t'shuvah* – looking inward, to not only acknowledge our sins, but

to forgive ourselves of them. Receiving forgiveness from others or even from God cannot be meaningful until we can begin to forgive ourselves. Not easy.

[announcer voice] "Are you haunted by misdeeds of the past? Do your past actions or inactions gnaw away at you? Do painful feelings or obsessive thoughts stay with you and slow you down? Does the expression 'if only I could have...' run through your mind like a circle without end?"

Sounds like a commercial for some new drug. "Try 'T'shuvrin' and rid yourself of past guilt."

No one can beat us up better than we can beat up ourselves. *Al cheit shechatanu l'faneinu* – for the sin we have committed... against ourselves – by lying to ourselves, by harboring anger and resentment, by not accepting ourselves as we are, by covering up our vulnerability, by holding an unrealistic ideal of who we should be or how we should be, and then, feeling bad about ourselves because of it. We can be so judgmental and hard on ourselves.

Sometimes we escape our own judgment by avoiding it. Rather than beating ourselves up, we withdraw and shield ourselves with layers of barriers between us and others. We may feel emotionally protected, but our relationships are diminished and we can lose the best of ourselves. I could talk for hours about my own personal experience and failed marriage and how my unconscious instinct for self-preservation created distance in my marriage. It also caused me to lose my connection with the best of who I am. If you'd like to do lunch sometime, I'm happy to share my story because I've learned a lot and have found my way back to rediscover much of the best of myself.

Here are three suggestions for moving towards self-forgiveness:

1) Give up self-resentment.

Resentment blocks the heart; forgiveness frees it. Accept yourself as you currently are, imperfections and all. The energy it takes to harbor anger, guilt and resentment towards ourselves is exhausting. Every bit of energy we give to dwelling on regrets, robs us of the energy we need to become the best of who we can be.

Remember that comment you made on that Thanksgiving that you keep kicking yourself over? Or those words that you regret saying when you thought you had more time? I never told my grandfather that I loved him even though I had the chance. For years I regretted it. I've let it go, and in my own way, I know that he knows.

- 2) View your mistakes and mis-deeds as learning opportunities. It may seem counterintuitive, but the Kotzker Rebbe wisely taught "There is nothing more complete than a broken heart." The lessons that we can learn from our mistakes and failures can make us stronger and ever more complete. Learning these lessons also allows us to be a stronger support to others.

I learned from the lesson of my grandfather, and make a concerted effort to let family and friends know how much I care for them.

- 3) Make a conscious decision to live in the present and not the past. "Forgive and forget" has no meaning because we don't forget. That being said, we can't allow ourselves to live in the past either. Give up the emotional hold that past memories have over you. You deserve better than to be tied down with grudges, resentments or anger. Don't use past experiences as an excuse for your current negative behavior. You can choose to act differently. You have a right to stop being hurt by events of the past. Do the work that allows you to put those emotional holds behind you. This kind of realignment allows us to live in the present, to move forward with a renewed sense of self and purpose. You are holy and a being of love. If you need to, rediscover that reality.

Maya Angelou, poet and civil rights leader teaches us: "We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate --- thereby, making the present comfortable and the future promising."

In better understanding this path of realignment, in forgiving ourselves and moving forward, it is helpful to look at the true meaning of the word

*"t'shuvah"*. Though it is often translated as "repentance", *"t'shuvah"* is nearly the opposite. Repentance often means that we feel remorse or guilt about the past and have the intention to change our behavior in the future. But dismissing the past and starting anew is often not realistic.

*"Teshuvah"* is a process and a pathway. It really means "turning" or "returning". But what are we turning towards, or what are we returning to?

As we put the Torah away, we conclude with the final verse from the Book of Lamentations, *"Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva"*. "Return us to You, Adonai, and we will return." *"Chadesh yameinu k'kedem."* "Renew our days as of old."

This is a verse I've struggled with. Renew our days as of old? Do we really want to be returned to the "good old days" of the Temple? Animal sacrifices? No flush toilets, supermarkets or air conditioners? We are so blessed in our time.

I've come to understand this verse in a new way:

*"Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva."* "Return us Adonai towards our path of holiness and wholeness." *"Chadesh yameinu k'kedem."* "Renew our days by returning us to our original nature."

Just as all things in nature turn towards their source – roots to the earth and leaves towards the sun, it is our nature to turn towards holiness, towards our best selves. When we "do *teshuvah*", we turn to break through all those barriers that we've created to find our truest self.

*Teshuvah* is coming home. When we do *teshuvah*, we come home to ourselves. Every step we take towards returning to the best of who we are is a blessing. And with every step the angels call out "welcome home, welcome home."

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