

Rosh haShanah Day sermon 2022

T'shuvah – How Do We Begin to Fix Ourselves?

T'shuvah is a slippery word.

We could translate it as repentance, but that sounds dour, even punitive. We can translate it as 'return' but while that is accurate but something is missing. Perhaps we could translate it as 'return to one's truest, most noble self' or 'return to the right path.'

T'shuvah isn't just linguistically slippery; it's ontologically slippery too. *T'shuvah* is a difficult, beautiful, heart-wrenching, life-giving idea. *T'shuvah* asks of us: what is the meaning and moral ramification of this action, thought, inclination?

Trickiest of all, knowing what we do about human nature, *t'shuvah* can also be very hard to implement. *T'shuvah* is not a circular motion but a spiral. You are charged to return to your true self, but also to a higher self. Ideally, when *t'shuvah* is complete, you can look at your restorative work and the repaired relationship from a higher vantage point. Maimonides – Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the Rambam – argued in his Mishneh Torah that '*t'shuvah g'murah*', 'complete repentance' is when a person is placed in the exact same situation that made them err the first time round and yet they are able to refrain from erring again.

Let's get to know the sagely Rambam a little, who will be our guide for this sermon today.

The 12th century philosopher-rabbi was a scholar and a medical doctor who lived in Muslim Spain and Egypt, a life marked both by upheaval and a stellar career progression (he became the personal physician to the Sultan of Egypt). He was known as a keen, systematic and (at the time) controversial thinker who made enduring intellectual contributions to Jewish thought. He is famous for two seemingly contradictory works: his intellectually-mystical 'Moreh Nevuchim', 'The Guide of the Perplexed', a philosophical treatise contemplating the nature of God, Torah and the Universe, as well as his very practical compendium of Jewish Law, the 'Mishneh Torah'. In the latter, he streamlined the meandering texts of the Talmud into a well-organized codex for educated lay Jews to aid them in the keeping of the *mitzvot*.

It is in this magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah (in chapter 'Hilkhos T'shuvah', 'the Laws of Repentance') that the Rambam delineates an approach to *t'shuvah*. He charted out five distinct steps with sacred practices. To this day, his guide on *t'shuvah* is an invaluable resource for rabbinic and other Jewish educators. And as rabbis are prone to saying: we all stand on the shoulders of giants.

One such person who beautifully stands on the shoulders of giants is Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. Rabbi Ruttenberg has very recently published an incisive book titled *'On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World'*. In her work, Rabbi Ruttenberg fuses both the practical Medieval teachings of Maimonides with trauma-informed and victim-centric insights from psychology, sociology and political science.

Rabbi Ruttenberg paraphrases Rambam's five-point-methodology. She identifies the following key steps that allow us to create a framework to focus on our own t'shuvah:

1. Naming and owning harm.
2. Starting to change the behavior that caused the harm.
3. Restitution.
4. Apologies.
5. Making different choices.

Naming and owning harm is what the Jewish tradition calls *'Vidui'*, a confession. We see this confessional framework in the Machzor, in the *'Al Chet's'* and the *'Ashamnu's'*, where the coverage of the collective prevents individual public shame, we work through to identify where we may have missed the mark.

Rabbi Ruttenberg makes it clear that *'owning harm entails risk'*. This is the first, hard step of the process. We have hurt someone, be it as individuals or systemically, as a society. Committing to not turn away from the consequence of our actions is incredibly hard. It is emotionally taxing to say *'I did*

this' and not to deflect, which is a natural defensive response. The risk is the bruising of our own ego and also re-engaging in a relationship with the aggrieved party which by definition is fraught. The word *t'shuvah* might be slippery but this work is very gritty indeed. She gives a few very recognizable examples of owning harm:

“It wasn't OK that I told that joke in the staff meeting. I didn't realize it at the time, but now I understand it was pretty transphobic.

I finally understand how my decision to hold a writer's retreat at a plantation sanitizes the horrors of slavery. I know I told you all I was sick last weekend and that's why I couldn't come help out. But actually, I went away with my girlfriend.

The organization continued to solicit the donor even after even after we found out that his money was obtained through criminal means and uh... the donor hasn't been held accountable for that.

Our state has, for centuries, and is even now continuing to violate treaties with the Sioux Nation. Our possession of this land and our development of it constitute theft.”

The second step in the *t'shuvah* process is changing the behavior that caused the harm. Rabbi Ruttenberg is quick to point out that *t'shuvah* is a two-pronged process that doesn't only lead to *restitution* but also leads to *transformation*. The spiritual depth of this process far outstrips the individual good

it seeks to attain and we can see *t'shuvah* as holistic and cumulative.

Rabbi Ruttenberg quotes the Mishneh Torah: 'What is complete repentance? The case of one who had it in their power to repeat a transgression, but has separated themselves from it and did not do it because they had repented.' This is the '*t'shuvah g'murah*' mentioned previously and I think it's important to recognize that this is not a quick-fix process. This can be a journey of months, years, decades. She cites the micro- and macro - the person who:

'...hasn't faced their problematic traits and unhealed wounds' but also 'the United States of America... has never reckoned deeply with its enslavement of people of African descent, so the country continues to find opportunities to commit the same sins of white supremacy again and again and again... the precise nature of the harm may be different—just as the sabotage and lashing out in relationships may not look exactly the same each time—but the patterns are undeniable.'

Of course, this feels overwhelming, especially at the societal, national or global scale. But *t'shuvah*, anchored in our deepest-held beliefs in free will, is meant to be heartening, not defeating. Even the tiniest of choices, the smallest of shifts can change our trajectory, like a moral version of the butterfly effect. In the individual cases there is also a deeply private component. In the High Holiday liturgy, God is addressed as

'Bochen Levavot', the 'Examiner of Hearts'; we examine our own hearts, trust God to be the Presence in that process and journey through this quietly until we are ready to take the next step. Engaging in *t'shuvah* away from the glare and gaze of judgment and expectation may help us feel *safer* to get started.

Maybe it's time to read that anti-racist book – quietly.

Maybe it's time to journal and reflect on harmful patterns of behavior – quietly.

Maybe it's time to start healing therapeutic work – just between you and the clinician.

Maybe it is as simple as starting a five minute daily prayer or meditation practice to open our souls to moral transparency.

Each of us can chart our own course on the map of return.

What is striking about the Maimonidean process of *t'shuvah* is that step three, restitution, comes before apology. Rabbi Ruttenberg is quick to point out that we live in a general American culture culture that frequently expects instant apology—which has the danger of being glib, insincere, incomplete or unexamined.

The Jewish process of *t'shuvah* rejects, as the famous Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls it, 'cheap grace': just saying sorry is not enough; doing sorry is what's expected – and then we get to say sorry once we've done sorry. The author writes: 'If we ask a perpetrator to engage too early with their victim—before they've confronted the seriousness of their

actions and their impact...--the likelihood of their causing additional harm, rather than meaningful repair, is much higher.'

Determining what restitution looks like is complex. The Mishneh Torah, and even the Torah itself, specify compensations for harm caused, including the covering of medical costs, time away from work, other financial losses incurred and compensations for the psychic damage suffered. Irrespective of how we fill in the particularities of making amends, the intentionality remains universal: '...part of the amends process involves also humbly accepting the fact that actions have consequences.'

The fourth step is apology. The Rambam teaches us that 'even after a person has made restitution of monetary debt [if applicable], they are obliged to pacify [the person harmed] and to beg their forgiveness.' An apology is about centering the experience of the person harmed, not the catharsis of the perpetrator, and an apology can take many forms but is united in an expression of genuine remorse.

The final step is our ability and freedom to make different choices. As already stated in the Rambam's words: *t'shuvah g'murah* is when the person is faced with another opportunity to transgress, the individual can rise above this and refrain from doing so. This is the hardest part we all struggle with this—myself included. The emotional grooves and neural pathways carved into our own psyches through the accumulation of our own hurts and experiences make it hard to transcend the

impulse to miss the mark, even when we have every intention doing so. This is why the *spiral model of t'shuvah* is important: we may not get there immediately but we keep chipping away at it, slowly reforming our behavior, putting down new wiring, new ways of being in the world. Rabbi Ruttenberg voices a poignant example of an internet troll who caused demonstrable harm (ah, the vicissitudes of social media!). The 'troll' reflected on his own behavior; its root causes, reached out, apologized and more importantly, made a donation to a charity important to the victim. All this happened quietly, out of the spotlight, but it happened—and the troll never trolled again.

'T'shuvah', Rabbi Ruttenberg writes, 'is like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, repairing broken pottery with gold. You can never unbreak what you have broken. But with the sincere and deep work of transformation, acts of repair have the potential to make something new.'

Dear friends, we have traveled through the five steps of *t'shuvah*.

These are concrete, actionable frames that help us ground into a sacred practice that merges intentionality with justice. As I said earlier in this sermon, however, the process of *t'shuvah* is greater than the sum of its parts. What are some of the deeper, holistic, spiritual teachings that we can take away?

One of the insights that is important to gain is that reconciliation and forgiveness are not necessarily entwined. '*Mechilah*', pardon, is a legal state which means we have

successfully repaired the error of our ways and the person harmed has been adequately compensated and our sacred obligation has been fulfilled. But '*kapparah*', oft translated as atonement, but with overtones of cleansing, is closer to the idea of forgiveness. While *kapparah* may be desired, it cannot be an expected reward. We cannot force the hands of those we have hurt into forgiving us on our own timeline. We must sit with the discomfort of not knowing how forgiveness unfolds. We cannot, after all, as the Mishnah indicates, come before God on Yom Kippur and seek *kapparah* (forgiveness) until we have done that inner work.

Among the bruised daily relationships of our lives, often, mistakes are reparable and hearts are gracious. If we morally 'scale up', the question becomes more pressing as an important consideration in the moral dilemmas of our culture is the impact of *power*.

Throughout these last years, we have seen unsettling amounts of moral injury caused to our collective psyche. 'Moral injury' is a term that emerges from the field of psychology that looks at the trauma of military veterans: even if they physically survive, veterans may sustain moral injury because their life-and-death decisions compromised their moral core. Throughout the tumultuous political era, the #MeToo movement and the clarion call for racial justice, we have all been subjected to moral injury. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, 'some are guilty but all are responsible.' Add to that the weight of the pandemic, the witness we have borne to mass death and the

waning of the health of our planet, and *t'shuvah* becomes not just a process for interpersonal restitution but a principle of profound planetary healing.

Closer to home in our Jewish world, there have also been repeated calls for *t'shuvah*. Both individually and institutionally, powerful Jewish clergy and other leaders have perpetuated harm: against vulnerable adults, students, congregants and other colleagues. Independent investigations are publishing reports documenting wrongdoing. The organizations in question have issued statements of apology and are undertaking – as we speak – proposals for an active path to *t'shuvah* and reconciliation. In other cases, where criminal activity was involved, it is our hope and expectation that the perpetrators are brought to account before the law. It does us well to remember that the agency of forgiveness is solidly placed by Judaism in the hands of the victims and cannot be demanded by the perpetrators.

How our institutions and communities will move forward is unfolding before us in real time, and it is within our moral prerogative to check their power and hold them to account.

T'shuvah offers no guarantee to redress the systemic imbalances of our world; the income inequality, the toxic legacy of white supremacy, the degradation of our planet, or just the myriad of interactions between the powerful and the powerless. Being part of a 3500 year old tradition means that we know deeply that the passage of time is slow. The premise of *t'shuvah* is the promise of our universal human covenant,

the charge of justice, the capacity for restorative healing and the unpredictability of grace.

'V'al kulam Eloah S'lichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu' –
'For all these sins, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.'

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in 'The Dignity of Difference':

"In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain. It introduces *into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace*. It represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do. It answers hate with a refusal-to-hate, animosity with generosity.

Few more daring ideas have ever entered the human situation. Forgiveness means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom."

As children of ever-unfolding Divinity who are striving to find our place among the vastness of the stars and the intimacy of the human heart, we can choose this freedom to turn and to return again. One could argue that the redemption and the healing of our world depends on it.