

SERMON FOR YOM KIPPUR MORNING SERVICE

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Some of you know that I was born into a Southern Baptist family in North Carolina. My mother, a devout woman, named me in honor of the family preacher and one of her fondest hopes was that I would become a Southern Baptist minister. Well, mom, it's a little late for the preacher thing. I can only hope you would be pleased with your son as "Rabbi for a day"!

Here we are, together again for Yom Kippur 5774. Last evening Rabbi George reminded us of the central themes of Yom Kippur: atonement and repentance. Repentance is accomplished through T'shuva, which consists of three parts: 1) regretting having committed the sin, 2) resolving not to commit that sin in the future and 3) confessing that sin before God.

Today I want to talk with you about the vital, but difficult matter, of how we can live up to the obligation of not committing the same transgressions repeatedly. Jewish sages and philosophers have long recognized the importance of change, change in our attitudes, change in our emotions, and change in our behavior. In the words of Maimonides "perfect repentance is where an opportunity presents itself to the offender for repeating the offence and he refrains from committing it because of his repentance and not out of fear or physical inability." "Perfect repentance," what an appealing concept! But achieving it does require us to undertake change, sometimes profound change. And what better time to consider this matter than the Days of Awe. Unfortunately, according to Rabbi Donniel Hartman's stark assessment, as a force for change Yom Kippur is a failure. In Hartman's words, "the passion, seriousness, and devotion

which accompany many of us through Yom Kippur, peters out into a form of amnesia....” And we remain just the way we were in a state of incomplete repentance.

In truth, we really cannot undergo significant change in a day or even in 10 Days of Awe. But we can learn from the reflections of Maimonides who, even as he depicted the notion of perfect repentance, cautioned us not to expect that our progress toward a better self would be a speedy journey.

Two recent examples will illustrate the difficulties and promise of redemption understood as real change in our attitudes and behaviors. The first is quite familiar to all of us. It involves the saga of Anthony Weiner, the serial electronic exhibitionist, who was just defeated in his mayoral bid in New York City. Weiner resigned his seat in Congress in 2011 with an apology to the public and a statement that he planned to undergo treatment in order to heal. He was tearful in apologizing to his wife who stood by him; he promised to make it up to her. Two years later he was back in the news announcing his bid for mayor of New York, indicating that his days of electronic porn were behind him. Barely two months into his campaign, Weiner confessed again that his bad behavior had continued unabated. Not much repentance here, much less redemption!

The second example received extensive coverage in a recent PBS Newshour story. It was headlined ‘San Quentin prisoners learn to find peace and power through personal exploration’. A psychologist, Jacques Verduin, began a program that offers violent offenders the tools to resolve conflicts inside and outside the prison. You can grasp the essentials of this program

through the experience of one of the rehabilitated prisoners, Rusty Trunzo, who was imprisoned for over 30 years for murder.

He states that when he completed his sentence three years ago, he left prison as a radically different man. “The first nine years in there, it was all about staying numb,” Rusty said. “Using [drugs], you know, and really not getting involved in much of anything.”

But all that changed when Rusty was transferred to San Quentin, the California prison where the Insight Prison Project (IPP) launched its highly successful mindfulness- and meditation-based prisoner rehabilitation programs fifteen years ago. Rusty signed up for a class. “And after that’s when I started making the changes,” he said. “Those classes were really instrumental for me.”

The Insight Prison Project is an initiative that, in Verduin’s words, “takes some of the dharma [a Buddhist and Hindu term referring to the purification and moral transformation of people] and finds a language and application for it that speaks to a multiethnic, incarcerated population.” (Incidentally, Verduin learned to integrate his approach using cognitive/behavioral psychology with eastern meditative practices at Spirit Rock in Marin.) The Insight project teaches prisoners how to witness their experiences through meditation, cultivating decision-making and emotional-intelligence skills that will reduce the chances of recidivism after they leave prison. The program lasts for a year after which prisoners become “peacemakers” while still incarcerated. As for Rusty, he is now a certified drug and alcoholism counselor and works as a housing coordinator for disadvantaged families. He points out that he is one of a growing

number of prisoners whose lives have changed fundamentally. Some hardened criminals appear to be achieving genuine redemption. But it takes time and you really have to work at it. Keep these examples in mind; Weiner who neither repented nor gained redemption and Rusty Trunzo who went the full journey.

WHY SHOULD WE CHANGE?

If change is so difficult, why bother? Some will argue that change does not require deliberate effort. Our personalities are what they are. We learn to cope through experience and the school of hard knocks.

Of course, there is some truth in this. We do change. As we mature through the various stages of life we usually change for the better. For example, as adults, we rarely continue the risky practices so common in our teenage years. Moreover, as we age most of us naturally acquire a somewhat mellower attitude toward human foibles, our own and others, than we held in our more judgmental youth.

There seem to be real limits, however, to our ability to master our more deeply seated urges and reactions through the natural processes of aging and maturity. As adults, we might still yell at a colleague or family member in anger; we might still lie to cover up an error; we might still cheat in business or tax matters; we might still be unfaithful to a loved one. In short we sin, we transgress. And when we do, we inevitably hurt others. During the Days of Awe we are likely to review some of our continuing difficulties in coping with others and how we treat others, only to relapse into the same practices before the arrival of Succoth.

Personal change is indeed difficult and it's crucial to find the motivation appropriate each individual. There are many reasons why the struggle is worth the effort. At the individual level our capacity for undertaking personal change is essential to help us learn to control our negative emotions and relate well to those around us. On a larger level I believe that the human capacity for change is one of the fundamental characteristics of our species that make civilization, especially pluralistic ones, possible.

Within our Jewish tradition we can find reasons which offer compelling motivation for some of us to attempt the change. Reform Judaism long ago abandoned the idea of resurrection as an inducement to good behavior, but it retained the notion that each human being has a God-given soul that contains a complete set of good traits of character. Our tradition advances as well the expectation that we enact our better natures by working to improve our behaviors and attitudes to repair ourselves and to repair the world. While many of our textual readings and rituals serve to remind us of our obligations to improve and become better persons, they offer little in the way of how this should be accomplished. We are admonished in Ecclesiastes, for example, "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry; for anger rests in the bosom of fools." (Ecclesiastes 7.9) And we are warned in Job that "anger kills the foolish man." (Job 5:2) But we will search these texts in vain for much help when it comes to conquering that devil, anger, which besets so many of us. There is no biblical recipe for anger management. The same holds true for our other demons. The concern of those who worry that Yom Kippur is a failure when it comes to really engendering change is partly based on this lack of methods to achieve the ideal of "perfect redemption."

Of course, there are other reasons besides religious for us to seek to improve our character.

The more we grow in our ability to cope with the pressures of work, family and daily existence, the more personally effective we become, the greater the esteem in which we are regarded by family members, friends, and co-workers. In addition we feel much better about ourselves when we succeed in controlling the emotions that lead us to transgress. We can all agree, I am sure, that there is good reason to change but where can we turn for help?

HOW CAN WE CHANGE?

During the past two decades a number of methods have emerged that offer individuals the hope of significant personal improvement. I will share two of these developments with you, one from Reform Judaism, the other from cognitive and behavioral psychology. Interestingly both aim for similar outcomes.

First, from modern cognitive/behavioral psychology:

During the past two decades great progress has been made in the areas of cognitive and behavioral psychology concerning self-understanding and relating to others. The advancement has come about partly as a result of the work of neurologists; but psychologists have helped to make this knowledge accessible and useful to us. My own appreciation of this scientific work began about half-way through my academic career at NYU when I initiated development of a management curriculum at the school of public service and started teaching management courses.

After several years of teaching in this area, I realized that our curriculum, including my own courses, were missing some of the most critical lessons that working managers and leaders

need to actually accomplish their goals: how to deal with interpersonal conflicts, how to motivate employees, how to deliver difficult personnel evaluations, and how to control one's own emotions in the face of intense conflict, to name just a few. To fill this gap I undertook research on human behavior in the workplace that resulted in a new course on developing managerial skills. Much of this course required students to engage in reflection and self-assessment to gauge their level of functioning in various aspects of personal and interpersonal functioning, followed by skill learning, application, and practice. The theory behind this method begins with the realization that changing our behaviors is a lengthy process that begins with self-knowledge. It then proceeds to deal with our issues involving working with and leading others. This is a process that cannot be learned in a few weeks or even months and that must be continuously practiced and reinforced. When most effective, it becomes an ever present aspect of our way of life.

My work in this area was helped substantially following publication 18 years ago of a remarkable book, *Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman, brother of our own Rabbinic Pastor Judith Goleman. Based on recent advances in neurology and psychology, Goleman provided both a fact-based description of personal and interpersonal functioning along with a methodology for changing our attitudes and competency in these areas; in other words, how to understand and improve our emotional intelligence.

I introduced Goleman's work into my teaching. The course drew substantial participation and was extremely well received. More interesting, and unexpected to me, I began to see a lot of change in myself. My ability to listen empathize, and communicate with my students grew substantially. This was affirmed by student evaluations. Family and friends too noticed that I

had begun to better manage some of my more irritating faults such as impatience and anger.

Those who know me best would, no doubt, hasten to add: “and you still have work to do.” The point, of course, is that we have to begin and, more importantly, keep at it.

A particularly memorable encounter with one student, however, left me perplexed about the nature of the work I had undertaken. This student, I later learned, a member of a catholic lay order, Communion and Liberation. One day after class she waited until others had departed to chat with me. She complimented the course saying how much she was learning and how unusual I was. I asked what she meant. She replied, “you are an unusually spiritual person.” Not intentionally I thought to myself. I had always seen myself as a most rational fellow, especially in the classroom. During the following months as I got to know her better, and she persisted in informing me of how spiritual she found me to be. But to be honest I struggled to understand what she saw that I had trouble identifying in myself and put the matter in the back of my mind. In subsequent years whenever spiritual topics came up, I figured this was something others felt that was simply absent from my being. On the other hand, I continued to work on improving my competence in the area of emotional intelligence while teaching others to do so.

What about Reform Judaism? What does it have to offer?

As we engage in the observance of Yom Kippur, we might ask: does our tradition offer us any methods to move beyond our acknowledgement that indeed we have transgressed? Does it help us with how to change and attempt to perfect our repentance?

In recent years within the Reform tradition a comprehensive and systematic method for self-improvement has developed that, I confess, I was unaware of until I began research for this talk. This Jewish movement is known as Mussar. In Biblical Hebrew Mussar means correction or instruction. In modern Hebrew mussar is the word for ethics. Modern practice of Mussar began as a Jewish ethical, educational and cultural movement among non-Hassidic orthodox Lithuanian Jews in the 19th century. In a recent book, *Everyday Holiness*, that deals with the modern practice of Mussar, Alan Morinis states that “its purpose is not that you will gratify all your desires but that you will become master of your desires, so that you can fulfill the potential of your higher nature.” At its core Mussar aims to draw practitioners closer to God. But in practice, it serves to improve personal and interpersonal competencies. This may strike some as just another self-help tool, but in fact its aim is to provide a method of personal change to bring our character in line with our higher aspirations and to make us more effective in our relations with others and in our obligation to repair the world, Tikkun Olam.

Mussar, like the teachings of Maimonides, starts with the notion that we all possess a variety of character traits, some we possess at birth, others accumulate through our upbringing, schooling, social connections, and so on. Some of these character traits are positive, some negative. Some of them are helpful to us as we relate to others, some are harmful. It is useful to think of character traits arrayed along a spectrum from adverse to beneficial to excessive. Let me explain. Take the notion of empathy and think of it as somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of related traits. At the negative extreme you would have hatred and indifference. In the center you would find sympathy and empathy. At the extreme end opposite hatred you would have, let’s say, hyper or excessive empathy. Hatred and indifference leads to serious

dysfunctions by making productive and caring relationships impossible. But in the extreme a hyper empathetic person is unable to keep the self separate from others, leading also to poor relationships. The point of Mussar (as with Maimonides) is that our task as human beings, and Jews in particular, is to undertake a lifetime of intentional growth and development to diminish the impact on our behavior of the negative traits and to elevate the positive ones.

How? Mussar relies on several methods to help us advance our spiritual development. These include journaling, meditation, and retreat. Many of us would likely to find these methods most effective under the tutelage of a trained Mussar teacher. But advancement on one's own is certainly possible. Progress cannot be made quickly, however, and it requires the development of self-understanding and the identification of the traits of character we need to work on. With persistence, we will eventually see significant progress toward what Mussar proponents think of as spiritual enlightenment. As I read and reflected on the way spiritual enlightenment was presented in various readings about Mussar, it began to dawn on me that the journey I began in my teaching based on cognitive psychology was in many respects much the same as the journey one would undertake with Mussar.

Both Mussar, with its emphasis on the spiritual, and cognitive/behavioral psychology, with its science-based approach, specify the need to identify and own one's failings (the Days of Awe aim to do precisely this) and then to develop and undertake a program of change. The more I thought about these similarities, the more I began to understand that my personal resistance to matters spiritual related to my conviction that our basic instincts, motivations, and values are part of the evolution of Homo sapiens as a social species as opposed to the spiritual emphasis that our traits derive from the breath of God. Both describe essentially the same inner space. I

can now finally appreciate how my former student, Lorna, viewed my work. I saw myself teaching managers to become better persons in the workplace (and in the process more effective); she saw these same efforts as achieving important spiritual goals. The outcome, for me or anyone else, will look much the same to an outside observer.

CONCLUSION

Return now to the examples I offered earlier. Like many of us Anthony Weiner took his transgressions up to the point of confessing them and promising to change. But he stopped there, failing to undertake the real challenge before him. Weiner's example shows how costly the half-way option can be. When he entered the NYC mayoral race he quickly shot to the top in the polls, demonstrating that people are willing to forgive. With the revelation of his failure to change, he lost almost all support. On the other hand, the prisoners in the Insight Prison Project at San Quentin owned up to their transgressions, which were far graver than Weiner's, and undertook a sustained pathway to reform and redemption. How much easier it should be for us to use our reflections and self-knowledge gained during Yom Kippur to define a pathway of change. But we do need a method, or approach, or curriculum to serve as a guide. We are fortunate that a number of guides are now available to us ranging from those based in cognitive psychology to those using more explicit spiritual grounding. But we are required to make a choice and act so that by Yom Kippur 5775 we are no longer faced with the same sins to confess and, in the words of the great philosopher Yogi Berra, experience *déjà vu* all over again.

And now may we all work hard for a healthy, happy, and "improved" new year. Shana Tova.

Selected References

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