

Rabbi Leah Cohen

Kol Nidre 5771 September 17, 2010

Remember

Yom Kippur often feels like an invitation to one's high school reunion. In both cases we are urged to return. We tear open the invitation with mixed emotions, anticipation of the familiar and uncertainty of the unknown. If we accept the invite these feelings build. But as the date draws closer, we start to wonder, "what are we really doing? What exactly are we returning to?"

Like a high school reunion, the thought of connecting to our past through cherished memories is appealing. Returning might be the act of recalling a certain person, time or place and drawing inspiration from that memory. For many of us this time of year highlights our relationships to those we care about. For friends that we have fallen away from, or relatives we've quarreled with returning might mean realizing how precious these people are to us and repairing these damaged relationship.

Returning might even mean re-connecting with those loved ones who are no longer alive. Especially at this season, we recall particular holiday traditions, like dinner at Grandmas or break-fast with friends. We might remember where they sat during services or how they looked in their holy day attire. In returning to the memory of our loved ones we find that they continue to sustain and guide us even after they are gone.

But it is not only people that we wish to return to, we might also think of returning as going back to a better period in our own lives when we were stronger, happier or healthier. If we meet this new year with pain or illness, we might look to an earlier time when we had overcome adversity before in order to find the strength to persevere now. For those who are feeling overwhelmed or burnt out, we might remember with a twinge of nostalgia a less complicated, less demanding time in our lives. Returning to these periods of relative calm can help us reflect on ways to restore our balance today. Or if we feel that in this last year we made some poor choices, we might want to return to a time when our actions were motivated by our higher self in order to learn from the model of our own past character.

For some, returning is not so much to a time, but rather to a particular place. I love seeing my former students, now young adults, returning here for the holidays. Even the lobby of this auditorium has become a place of return, where friends gather to greet each other, some whom they haven't see for a while. I know some members who went to their parent's congregations over the holidays returning to childhood homes that still hold a sense of comfort and security.

But at this time of year, the concept of returning goes even deeper than revisiting our past. We use the word *teshuvah*, the Hebrew word for returning which conveys more than simply reconnecting with a specific person, period or place.

During this season we remember that we are not just a brain and body, we have something else that Judaism calls our soul. We remember that like the physical and emotional needs of our bodies and minds, our souls have needs too. They yearn to grow, to connect, to be nurtured, to return. In our predominantly secular world, the spiritual needs' of our souls often lie

dormant. But at this sacred season our souls are stirred by the sounds of the *shofar* and the notes of *Kol Nidre*. At this intense period they take center stage as we take a *cheshbon nefesh*, an inventory of our souls that goes beyond the deeds of this past year and encompasses the needs of our souls.

It is challenging for us to know the needs of the soul. But tonight we can start; there are many gates to enter this hidden realm. If we are most comfortable with the intellect, then that may be the logical entry point for us. We can think about all the needs we experience in our lives and evaluate how we get them met. Then we turn our thoughts to whatever is left over. What are we seeking when we have enough food, clothing and shelter, when we are satisfied in our professional, recreational, and relationship choices but somehow know something is missing. Or if we are more intuitive, we might have a sense of unrest or disillusionment. We might feel bored or deadened, aware that we want something more in our lives, but not more of what we already have. Maybe we want something other, but we are not sure what that other thing is called.

Naming this something other is tricky. The name itself becomes a point of attraction or repulsion, and is such a personal matter. So for some the word God, is a source of comfort, and for others an immediate turn off. At this time of year we hear such appellations as Our Father, Our King, *Avinu Malkenu*; we are offered images of the divine as a Rock, Redeemer, Sheppard, or Judge. But our tradition has many names to choose from: Creator of the Universe, Eternal One, Source of Life and we are not even limited to these. We can choose whatever name speaks to us as we start out on this path of return.

Teshuvah can begin with a name or even just a sense of curiosity. For some people who at one point had a spiritual connection from which they have grown removed, this may be a familiar, if forgotten path. Perhaps at one time in your life, you believed in a Higher Power, but then tragedy struck and your feelings about God changed. Tonight we can choose to reconnect with the Source of Light, even from the depths of our darkest sadness or anger. Honestly expressing these painful feelings, out loud in prayer or silently in the stillness of our hearts can be the first step on the path back.

For others the distance to God may have simply occurred as a result of neglect. There might not have been any particular event that happened rather a myriad of little things may have taken us off course. Like any relationship, a spiritual relationship takes communication, commitment and caring. We need to invest time and energy or before we realize it apathy and guilt crop up where faith once blossomed. If this is our situation the good news is that *teshuvah* is possible because the Eternal One is always waiting. The first step of return might be remembering what we once had and what worked for us in the past. Whether it is prayer, meditation, study or any other form of spiritual practice that puts us back in contact with the Fountain of Life, the season of transformation is upon us and the gates are open now.

But what if we cannot return to a relationship with God, because we never had one to begin with? You cannot return to something that never existed in the first place or can you? I think we can try if we are willing to be completely honest with ourselves. For some, the *teshuvah* for this year might not be a 180 degree about face, or even a major course adjustment. *Teshuvah* might be just the slightest inclination. All we might need to do for now is make a little shift in direction, just enough to face a question. The question we are asked to confront at this

season is simply this: Is there any aspect of our lives that is not completely satisfied with answers and activities found in strictly secular sources. Meaning do you have questions, concerns or needs that your spouse, friend, doctor, lawyer, therapist, accountant, trainer, teacher, or other in your life cannot adequately address? If so, then you have an opportunity to turn even slightly towards exploring what a spiritual life might mean for you.

By tomorrow evening, our annual reunion, will come to an end at the communal breakfast which fittingly does take place in a high school cafeteria. We showed up and reconnected. We saw old friends and remembered old times. The rituals completed, the words recited, we hope we will leave refreshed and renewed from our time together.

But if these holy days are to have any deeper meaning or provide any direction in our lives we must make this experience more than an annual reunion, we must make a choice - do we return or not? Everything in Judaism encourages us towards an affirmative response and God who we call the Keeper, the Maker, the Judge, the Beloved of our souls sits tearing open stacks of return envelopes just waiting for our reply.

The Talmud says: Return one day before you die.

But how can we know that day, the day before we die?

We cannot.

What then?

Consider each day your last,

And return now.

THE END