

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768
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Temple Isaiah

Shana Tova.

Welcome back. Welcome back to your home. To your family. To your space.

Welcome back and welcome IN to our kehillah kedoshah, our sacred community.

Tonight begins our journey into the *aseret yimei teshuva*: the 10 days of teshuva

The 10 days in the Jewish calendar dedicated to repentance and return.

What normally might take a semester or two to accomplish...

We cover in 10 days -

10 days, from now until the close of Yom Kippur, to change from who we are into who we want to be...

And tonight is your first class in Life Transformation 101:

Welcome back. ☺

So, as with all classes, allow me to review the syllabus:

Why are we here? What are our goals?

(Will there be a final exam?)

Over the next 10 days, we're here to do the work of transformation.

Radical transformation.

For ourselves and for the world.

We take the journey together.

On the path of teshuva – the path of return.

And the final exam?

It's actually a take-home test. At the end of Yom Kippur, you'll take yourselves home: back to your families, your communities, your schools, your work, your world...and the test will begin.

So how are we going to transform?

In the Jewish tradition, we use teshuva –

A gift from the rabbis –

A tool, a technique, a practice...a path to follow

The root of teshuva is about turning and returning:

We are asked to return to our mistakes --

To return to the moments in our life when we have missed the mark.

And to turn to those we have hurt and to apologize.
To seek forgiveness.

Teshuva pushes us to approach family and friends and co-workers with words of regret –
wringing our hands, gesturing awkwardly, searching for the right words.
Constantly in motion.

Turning and Returning.
It's active. It's embodied.
It's an emotional, spiritual and physical workout.

It may sound strange when we've been sitting in our seats for an hour...
But teshuva is meant to be active and INTERACTIVE.

It demands a deep and profound conversation with yourself, your inner self, your deepest self.
The rabbis called it a *heshbon hanefesh* – an accounting of the soul.

Teshuva demands interactions with other people.
Conversations where our lives intersect and collide.

Teshuva sends out an invitation every year –
to meet God halfway down the path of repentance and forgiveness.
Hashiveinu adonai eleicha v'nashuva: Return to us Adonai and WE will return to you.

We will return.
We can't get there by proxy.
We can't outsource our teshuva.
This is OUR TESHUVA.
That is our path.
WE have to take those steps.

And we'll do it...slowly, carefully...
We'll take those steps.
Even though it's hard work to change.

We'll do it because the alternative is to stay exactly where we are: no growth, no development, no progress...

We'll do it because the alternative is to carry the weight of our regrets and our missed opportunities for another year.

So we'll take those steps...because we're ready for change.

We're ready for change but the truth is...we're creatures of habit.
We wake up, we go to work, we shop at the same stores, we prepare the same meals, we have the same conversations, we fall asleep and we start all over again.
It's okay. That's who we are – we like patterns. We like rituals.

They're comforting and predictable and useful and safe.

And good things can come out of habits...
the 7 habits of highly effective people...exercise...brushing and flossing...

But, we can also get stuck in a rut. We can find ourselves defaulting to bad behaviors, relying on old excuses, acclimated to our routines, our temperaments, our treatment of one another.

We promise ourselves we'll change and we find ourselves right back where we started.
Using the same words. The same excuses. The same justifications.

In this way, our habits are NOT making us more effective.

We look at our lives and we say "this isn't what I want"
We are uneasy and uncertain
We are frustrated and disappointed
We feel incomplete.
And yet we don't know how to change – how to break the pattern

This is why we have Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
To help us say "ENOUGH!"
We're not going forward like this anymore!

The High Holy Days answer our call for help.
Here is the time to transform yourself and your life.
Here are the prayers and the music and words of Torah to guide you.
Here are your family and friends
Here is a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, supportive of change and transformation.
Turn and see.
Everything you need is right here...YOU can do it!

You CAN do it.
You can change.
We forget we can do that.
Our fast pace of life keeps us off-balance.
We lose our center.

And we forget the power that we have...to change, to transform, to affect others.

Or we underestimate the power we have -
We think we're small.
Perhaps even insignificant.
But the effects of our actions are quite profound –

Now, more than ever,
we know that our lives are intertwined with those around the world.

What we buy, from our coffee to our clothing, affects the global economy and the global community.

We use the same air, the same water, the same resources.

We are part of a system in which every one of our actions has an effect.

Maimonides, a 12th century rabbi, understood this model of cause and effect long before “global warming” and “fair trade” reached our lips. He saw the impact of our global citizenship through the lens of teshuvah:

Take a look in your HHD booklets on PAGE 9 at text #1: (page flipping)

Maimonides explains, through no uncertain terms, that our personal transformation is linked to the fate of the world.

Accordingly, through the entire year, a person should always look at oneself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. A person who performs one sin tips one's balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings about destruction. A person who performs one mitzvah tips one's own balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to oneself and others. This is implied by [Proverbs 10:25] “A righteous person is the foundation of the world,” meaning, one who acted righteously tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it... (Hilchot Teshuva – Rambam 3:4)

You thought your daily actions were insignificant? I'm telling you they have cosmic consequences.

Teshuva is not just affecting our lives – it's affecting the world.

The smallest change has enormous impact.

The one who acts righteously tips the balance of the entire world and saves it...

We're not talking about somebody else –

The nobel prize winner...the kid with the unbelievable Bat Mitzvah project...

We're talking about you.

The one who acts righteously tips the balance of the entire world and saves it...

This is about you.

Ok. Pop quiz: Your first one of the semester...

What is the Hebrew verse inscribed above our ark at Temple Isaiah?

Tzedek tzedek tirdof: Justice, justice YOU shall pursue...

See? We're talking about You again.

YOU shall pursue.

The Torah instructs each one of us to see ourselves as agents of change in the world.

Because it is possible for an individual to pursue and attain justice.

To adjust the imbalance of power between rich and poor -
To fill the world with compassion and peace...

We tend to underestimate the power we have.
But our tradition believes in us.

In 1999, the leaders of the Reform movement reaffirmed our commitment to tzedek, justice in a powerful document known as the “new” Pittsburgh Platform. An excerpt can be found in your booklets, PAGE 11, text #11.

This statement was issued 114 years after the original Pittsburgh Platform, written in 1885, a document that defined the then nascent American Reform movement.

As it was then, so it is now¹: The pursuit of tzedek, justice, is a cornerstone of living a Reform Jewish life.
Read along with me:

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God’s creation. Partners with God in tikkun olam, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. *We are obligated to pursue tzedek, justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth’s biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice.* We affirm the mitzvah of tzedakah, setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands. (A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, Pittsburgh, 1999)

We tend to underestimate the power we have.
But our tradition believes in us.
Believes in our capacity to change.
To transform ourselves -
To transform the world “as it is” to the world “as it should be.”

Now if one person is that powerful --
If one person has that much potential...think of what we might do together.

The impact of our collective voices and prayers would be overwhelming.
Awe-inspiring.
The sound of our voices together -
The weight of our bodies –
We are more powerful as a group.

¹ Excerpt from 1885: Section 8. In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

Tradition teaches that as we reached the Red Sea,
Moshe lifted his staff, the waters parted and we passed through on dry land.
But there's another version of the story,
A version told by the rabbis in a midrash, a commentary on the miraculous events of Exodus.

Take a look at PAGE 9, Text #2: (page flipping)

The Torah says:

And the Children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground (Exodus 14:22). [The rabbis reply] How is this possible? If they went into the sea, then why does it say *upon the dry ground*? And if they went *upon the dry ground*, then why does it say *into the midst of the sea*? This is to teach that the sea was divided only after Israel had stepped into it and the waters had reached their noses, only then did it become dry land. [Midrash Rabbah – Exodus 21:10]

It was not Moshe's staff that split the waters -
It was the people moving forward together.
Our ancestors...unified in purpose and vision.
They stepped forward together and the waters parted.
No one thought it was possible...and still, they took a step forward.
Together.

Many years have passed since our ancestors stood at the Sea.
And we find ourselves facing a new tide of seemingly insurmountable obstacles...

Homelessness in Los Angeles
The Erosion of our Environment
Genocide in Darfur
The threat to Israel's safety and security
Ongoing, overwhelming crises that congregants at Isaiah are working hard to address...
We stand at the Sea and we wonder how we will cross.

If I raise my staff like Moshe, no waters will part.
If I raise my staff, nothing is going to happen.
I probably won't even get a meeting with local politicians.

However, if we join together, with our passion for justice, and our commitment to see change in our lives and in our world – if we take action together...50 of us, 500 of us, 2000 of us... if we step forward and demand to see changes made...the waters will begin to part.²

Look at our history, our heritage,
Our family album...
We are a people that steps forward.

² Thank you to Rabbi Stephanie Kolin for her organizing language!

Avraham journeyed forth to an unknown land.
Moshe approached a burning bush.
And B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, walked into the Sea.

We are a people that steps forward.
Together.
For change. For transformation. For all that is possible.

One final quote, PAGE 9, (Text #3):

Hope is a human virtue, but one with religious underpinnings. At its ultimate it IS the belief not that God has written the script of history, that God will intervene to save us from the error of our ways or protect us from the worst consequences of evil, but simply that God is mindful of our aspirations, with us in our fumbling efforts, that God has given us the means to save us from ourselves; that we are not wrong to dream, wish and work for a better world. In the end, great systems of thought are self-validating. To one who believes that the human condition is essentially tragic, the human condition will reveal itself as a series of tragedies. To one who believes that we can rewrite the script, history reveals itself as a series of slow, faltering steps to a more gracious social order. [Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference]

I ask you, tonight, what do you believe?
Can we rewrite the script?
Will we take a step forward?

If the answer is yes, then begin the journey with us tonight.
With a few steps forward.
A little bit of teshuva, a little bit of turning, each day for the next 10 days.

And as we begin to move, the world will move with us.
As we dip our toes into the sea, the waters will begin to ripple.
This year, step forward...
Join us at the sea of change...and help us make the waters part.

Shana Tova.