

Last night I spoke about prayer. Today I'd like to talk about another one of the pillars of the High Holy Days .

Teshuvah.

We usually translate it as repentance.

But that isn't really what the word means.

Teshuvah literally means return.

Return to what? Many rabbis interpret this as a return to God, and that is beautiful.

I've been thinking about this and an idea that resonates strongly with me is that it is also a return to ourselves.

Because somewhere along life's path we can become increasingly distant from ourselves... distant from something that was once part of us.

And the truth is, there are parts of our lives that we've left behind as we have made our way through life.

Some things we needed to leave behind.

Ideas that no longer made sense.

Relationships that no longer worked.

Ways of understanding ourselves that we simply outgrew.

But perhaps there are other things we never really intended to lose.

They were almost casualties on the road of life.

And sometimes we don't even realize we've lost them until years later.

Maybe Joy or excitement. When I spend time each day with our kids in early childhood, it never ceases to amaze me how easily their eyes light up at the smallest of things.

And a birthday ? They cannot hold the joy they feel. I wish I could feel that amount of joy as I contemplate my upcoming big birthday: 40, 50.

We're the same person.

But something has changed.

And it's not just that we are older.

Somewhere along the way, we lose a little of our capacity for anticipation — the sense that something wonderful might actually be about to happen.

Or forgiveness.

Remember when you were younger, how much easier it was to just move on?

And then life teaches us to keep score.

We remember what was said.

We remember who called last.

We remember who didn't call.

None of this happens because one morning we wake up and announce:

Today I'm going to become less joyful.

Today I'm going to find it harder to forgive.

It happens gradually.

Life happens.

We get hurt.

We get disappointed.

We get busy.

We learn.

We protect ourselves.

We become who we need to become.

And somewhere in the process, things can get left behind.

So perhaps one of the questions of teshuvah is,

what have I left behind that I need to go back for?

[Pause.]

I know something about that.

I grew up deeply immersed in Orthodox Judaism.

It grounded me.

It shaped me.

Judaism wasn't something I did occasionally.

It was simply the world in which I lived.

Prayer.

Shabbat.

Kashrut.

Learning.

Shul.

There was a rhythm to life, and Judaism provided that rhythm.

And then, in my early twenties, I emigrated to this country.

And for the first time, I was away from many of the expectations of my family and the community in which I had grown up.

My world became much bigger.

I met different people.

I encountered different ways of living.

I began asking different questions.

And I began discovering parts of myself that did not fit neatly into the Orthodox world in which I had been raised — including the realization that the person I might one day love and build a life with would not fit the expectations of that world.

And I needed to make room for that.

I needed to become myself more fully.

And I would not undo that journey.

But here is what took me much longer to understand.

In becoming who I needed to become, I had left something behind.

Not Orthodoxy.

I don't mean that.

Something bigger.

Something spiritual.

Some sense that Judaism wasn't only my profession, or my history, or my identity.

It was something that could nourish me.

Something that could challenge me.

Something that could hold me.

And the irony was that the more Judaism became my profession, the easier it became for that part to disappear.

I was always in synagogue.

I was always leading a service.

I was always celebrating a holiday.

But increasingly I was doing Judaism for other people. Not for myself.

I never rejected it.

There was no dramatic moment when I said, "I don't believe this anymore."

I simply allowed something to drift away. Almost carelessly.

And eventually, I began to miss it.

Eventually I realized that I had left something along life's path that I wanted back.

[Pause.]

And that, for me, became teshuvah.

Return.

But here is the part of teshuvah that I think we sometimes misunderstand.

Returning does not mean going backward.

Because when I began to reengage with Judaism, I was not the twenty-year-old who had drifted from it.

I couldn't be.

Too much had happened.

I was returning to something I had known before — but I was meeting it now as the person all of those years had made me.

And that changed everything.

Prayer is probably the clearest example for me.

At twenty, I prayed because prayer was what you did.

There were words.

There were times.

There were rules.

There was a structure.

And I knew the structure very well.

But when I returned to prayer later in life, I discovered that I was no longer saying those words in the same way.

I couldn't.

Because now, when I say Modeh Ani — thank you for giving me another day — I know something about how fragile a day can be

The words may be exactly the same.

I am not.

And perhaps that's what makes return so powerful.

We never return empty-handed.

We return carrying the years.

We return carrying what we have learned.

We return carrying the people we have loved.

We return carrying our disappointments and our scars.

We return carrying the things that worked out beautifully and the things that never worked out at all.

And when we meet that old thing again — prayer, wonder, trust, forgiveness, Judaism, perhaps even God — we meet it at a different level.

Not with the innocence with which we once knew it.

With depth.

Maybe the joy we recover at sixty will never look exactly like the joy we had at six.

Perhaps it shouldn't.

[Pause.]

Pause: it is a joy filled less with excitement and more with gratitude - sheheheyanu - thank you, God, for bringing me to this day!

So this year, I wonder what teshuvah might mean if we ask ourselves not:

What do I need to change?

But rather:

What have I left behind?

Where did I once find joy?

Where have I lost courage?

Where did I once have more humility?

Where did I once have more hope?

What part of my Jewish life once spoke to me that I stopped listening for?

What did I once believe was possible?

And is there something there worth going back for?

Not so that we can become who we were.

We can't.

And I'm not sure we would want to.

Teshuvah asks us to go back as we are now.

Go back with everything we know.

With the accumulated wisdom.

With the questions.

With the years.

With the scars and the successes.

With the sorrows and the strengths.

And see whether something we once left behind is still there—

not waiting for us to become who we used to be,

but waiting to become part of who we are now.

Maybe that is teshuvah.

Not going backward.

Going back for what we still need in order to move forward.