

Teshuvah through Mindfulness
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5775
Rabbi Gary Pokras

Good Yuntif!

It's been a whole year since we gathered together, and a lot has happened during the interim. The world seems even more tumultuous than it did last year at this time, and in our own personal lives we have experienced both good and bad. Our community is not exactly the same as it was, and we as individuals are not exactly the same as we were. We hope, even pray, that from this time last year to this moment now, we have learned and have grown ... or in my case, have shrunk.

Yes, under this robe, there is much less of me than there used to be.

Between November and May, I lost close to sixty pounds. When I was younger, I was trim. Then I became a rabbi. Personally, I blame the Sisterhood! (Just kidding!) I knew that it was happening, but because the change was incremental it was easy to ignore. Like so many of us, I created an internal narrative, telling myself: I'm in good shape and in good health, and I can change later if I like.

Sure, every so often I would buy an exercise video and work at it for a few weeks, but under no circumstances was I prepared to change ... my diet. Life was too short and I was going to enjoy my food! So for fifteen years I continued to write the narrative I wanted to hear, and to play it over and over in my mind – until this past October, when I was finally inspired to act.

So in November I went to a health spa and discovered, much to my surprise, that really healthy food could taste delicious! For the first time, I really decided to change my diet – and also to exercise. I stopped eating the garbage and started eating healthy, and exercised aggressively every day and wouldn't you know it, I began to lose weight – and that excited me. But it didn't last long. By January I plateaued out, and it became clear that if I was really going to get anywhere meaningful, then I not only had to eat healthy foods, but healthy portions. And you know what that means.

This was my nightmare!

And I was absolutely determined.

So I did the unthinkable. I got an app for my phone. A calorie counter. And I logged every bit of food that passed my lips. Every one. And I also logged every calorie I burned with exercise. And I let the app set my daily calorie budget for me, and I made it my business to stay within budget almost every single day.

What happened next surprised me. As I logged in meal after meal and snack after snack, I discovered that I was eating far more calories than I thought I was, and that I had made assumptions about my food that were quite frankly, wrong. In other words, I got an education that really challenged my narrative – and the more I paid attention, the more I learned, and the more I adjusted my eating habits. And that is when the weight really came off, and my fitness level soared, and my health returned to and even surpassed a baseline the doctors never thought I would see again.

Since June I have been in maintenance mode. I am no longer using the calorie counter, but I am still mindful of what and how much I eat. I worry occasionally that I will slip into my old habits, and yet I also allow myself to enjoy many foods that I would have avoided earlier in the year. And while there is much less of me than there was, I am more truly myself than I have been for a very long time. It is as if I have returned not only to what I really am, but to what I can be.

The Hebrew word for this is *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah literally means ‘return.’ On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we make *teshuvah*, we try to return, and we come here to do it.

Yet, what is it that we are trying to return to? Some of us might be trying to reconnect with our people, or our sense of belonging. For others it might be about our Jewish identity, or our families. Some of us are on a deep spiritual journey, trying to find or return to our traditions, or dare I say it, even to God. All of these are answers we might expect, and there are many more as well. Yet, I would like to suggest another possibility, one that I found only recently in a marvelous book called *Mindful Jewish Living* by Rabbi Jonathan Slater.

Rabbi Slater says that what we really seek to return to is the truth. Not truth in some esoteric or abstract sense, but rather, the truth of our lives, the truth of who we are as human beings, and of the trajectories we place ourselves upon. The truth of our joys and our sorrows, our dreams and our disappointments, our triumphs and our suffering. The truth of our relationships and our actions, our thoughts and our feelings, our place in the world and our ability to live authentic meaning-filled lives. This is what we seek to rediscover through return, *teshuvah*.

Each one of us has an active mind that constantly frames our realities. Whenever we see or do something, or something happens to us, we create a narrative, an interpretation of the experience. And, once we have ‘written’ that story in our minds, we repeat it over and over until we believe it to be true – even if it isn’t. I’d be willing to hazard a guess that for most of us, eighty percent or more of what we remember is narrative rather than actual fact. And just as I had an internal narrative about my weight and health, those narratives say more about what we wish or assume than about what is true. If we are not in the habit of challenging our

narratives, and we make life choices based on those narratives, then are we really being true in our lives?

This simple insight has completely changed the way I look at the High Holy Days. Even more, as I read the book, I discovered that the techniques I used to successfully lose weight and improve my health are the same Jewish techniques for the *teshuvah* of returning to the truths of our lives. I didn't realize it at the time, but it's true – and if it worked for me, it can work for you!

I believe there are four necessary pieces to this kind of *teshuvah*. I won't lie to you and say they are easy, for they are not. But they are doable, and enormously effective.

The first is determination. The process of *teshuvah* requires intention and will, which means we must be committed to seeing it through. For years I allowed myself to avoid making a commitment to my health, and I have a stack of unused exercise videos and manuals to prove it. For most of us, finding and keeping that determination is really difficult. For many people, it takes a life changing trauma to serve as our wake up call. I know. I have seen this many, many times. Yet, we are also capable of finding our motivation before we are confronted with a crisis, one little step at a time, and that is what makes this approach so interesting. Whether we find it by a life changing event or slowly bit by bit, once we are truly committed, we will apply our determination to every other facet of the process, and thereby create a series of new habits that can transform our lives.

The second is mindfulness. By mindfulness I mean paying attention to the lives we are living, our decisions and actions, and the impact they have on us and on the people around us. For example, in my weight loss, I did not become truly mindful until I started logging my caloric intake. Only then did I become aware of my actual eating habits. Once we have developed the habit of mindfulness, we will apply our newfound awareness to every other facet of the process.

The third element is self-honesty. Once we have identified our internal narratives, self-honesty requires us to challenge the truth of those narratives. This is incredibly difficult to do, because our natural tendency is to believe the stories we tell ourselves. I was entirely convinced that I was not really overweight and that I was fit – despite the physical evidence. Unless and until we are truly honest with ourselves, we will remain in exile from the truth of our lives. Once we have developed the habit of self-honesty we can apply that honesty to every other facet of the process.

Finally, we must cultivate a sense of compassion towards ourselves, forgiving ourselves when we fail (which we will do often), and then jumping right back in rather than giving up. Among the many features of my calorie counting app is a weight graph. Every morning at the same time I would log in my weight. The graph depicting my weight loss was not a straight downward line. It was filled with jagged

hills and valleys, and also with periods of plateau where it seemed that no matter what I tried, I could not shed another pound. At many of those moments where it looked like I was going nowhere, or in the wrong direction, I was tempted to give up. My wife Shauna deserves incredible credit for helping me through those difficult moments, so that now I can look at the graph, see the hills and valleys in the line, and recognize them as fleeting moments along a steady path of weight loss. Without compassion for ourselves, we will consider ourselves failures when we are not, and will give up on the important soul work of this season. Once we have developed the habit of compassion we will not only be able to apply it to ourselves, but also to the people around us.

To see how this all works together, let's look at an example where determination, mindfulness, self-honesty and compassion were absent: the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. Abel was a shepherd and Cain a farmer. Both offered sacrifices to God, but God only accepted Abel's. Rabbi Slater teaches that, "Those who cannot see ... [the] ... truth will experience only their own needs, their own pains, their own sense of self."¹ When Cain realized that God favored Abel's sacrifice over his own, his 'face fell.' We don't know exactly what internal narrative Cain created at that moment, but it is easy to imagine how his perception of the unfairness of it all eventually turned into hatred for his brother. This internal story was so powerful, that Cain was unable to hear the truth – not even from God. God accepted Abel's offering, because Abel offered his best – the choicest firstling of the flock, whereas Cain did not. God tells Cain that he simply needs to offer *his* best. And God also challenges Cain to examine his heart. But Cain could not hear – for him it became a competition with Abel. All he saw was his own failure in stark contrast to Abel's success. Such a lack of self-compassion! And his internal narrative was so loud that it drowned out the truth, which was that his failure was transient, that his brother was not a threat, and that God would accept his next offering if he offered the best fruits of his crop. Cain's inability or unwillingness to be mindful, truthful and compassionate led him to create an internal crisis that resulted in the murder of his brother, followed by a terrible punishment Cain would shoulder for the rest of his days.

Now, our internal narratives don't lead us to commit murder ... right? But they can lead us to hurt each other and ourselves, and that is what we try to mend on this day.

Yet, how do we do it?

There are several ways, including keeping a journal or micro-blogging. One of the most effective techniques is meditation, and yes, there is a Jewish tradition of meditation that spans a thousand years or more. Meditation is a mindfulness

¹ Slater, Jonathan (2013-01-17). *Mindful Jewish Living* (Kindle Locations 892-896). Aviv Press. Kindle Edition

practice, and mindfulness like all other things in life, is temporary. We are mindful only during the moments that we practice mindfulness. The rest of the time we are not. So meditation is effective when we make it our habit, because then mindfulness also becomes a habit, and with mindfulness we can cultivate honesty as a habit, and also compassion. This is real *teshuvah*, real change in our lives, and I'd like to give you just a taste of it right now.²

So let's start by finding a comfortable position, and if possible, try to have both feet on the floor. If you would like, I invite to close your eyes. If not, try to leave your gaze fixed and out of focus. Either way, the goal is to remove the constant sensory input we get through our eyes so that we can focus on just one thing instead of many. Meditation begins with breath, and that will be our focus for the next few moments, although really, we could pick anything. Breathing is something we do all day long, but we rarely pay attention to it. So, with our eyes closed or out of focus, let's pay attention to our breath now. Don't control it, just let it happen. Where do you feel your breath most? The tip of your nose? Your chest? Your belly? Wherever it is, notice how your breath feels as you inhale and again as you exhale. Consider how your breath is changing the shape of your body, how it expands and contracts your belly, your chest, your nose, and again, try not to control or force your breathing, just observe.

By paying attention to our breathing, something that normally runs on autopilot, we become mindful. It sounds incredibly easy, but it's not, because we have active minds. By now, our thoughts may have already taken us away from our breath, and we have ceased being mindful. We have gone back on autopilot. When this happens, our inclination is to judge ourselves. "What?! I can't even focus on something as simple as breathing?" This is nothing more than a new narrative that will take us even farther away if we let it. Instead, we should use mindfulness, honesty and compassion. Mindfulness and honesty allow us to say: "look at that, I just let my thoughts wander." It is a recognition of the truth, but nothing more. We become aware of what we have done, and we affirm the truth that our thoughts have wandered. However, we do not judge ourselves. Instead, we can exercise self-compassion and say: "No problem. Let's go back to being mindful." So let's do that now, and focus on our breathing even as I continue to speak.

This cycle of moving from awareness to lack of awareness is like moving from being awake to being asleep, and it will happen over and over again. If we are determined, and practice mindfulness, honesty and compassion, we will spend more and more of our time awake and aware. While we are focusing on our breath now, we really could focus on anything as a mindfulness practice, whether it is different parts of our bodies, or our feelings, or our relationships – any aspect of our lives. The truth is that we run on autopilot far more than we'd like to admit, and in every regard. The more mindful we become, the more aware we become of how we impact

² Meditation exercise taken from Slater, chapter 1.

ourselves, the people around us, and all of Creation; and the closer we grow to the truth of our lives.

Let's take one more nice breath now, and slowly open our eyes. This year, may our eyes remain open to the truths of our own lives, and to those of the people around us. May we be determined in our *teshuvah*, in our mindfulness, our honesty and our compassion. And may we help each other along the way.