

## **Erev RH**

Shanah Tovah!

Every year I have found it useful to review the process of Teshuvah, and focus on one aspect or another of it. This year is no different.

Teshuvah is a four step process. It starts with acknowledging that something you did was wrong. It may have been wrong because it broke a rule, or a law, or just an unspoken custom. It may also have been wrong because it harmed someone or something, even if it did not break any specific law. Once you have identified the issue and internalized that whatever happened was your fault, you then need to state this misdeed to the person who has been wronged. This is not necessarily an apology, by the way. It can be, but it does not have to include the words, "Please forgive me." After both you and the person you have harmed know that it is your fault, the best continuation is to fix whatever was broken. Sometimes things can be fixed quite easily. Or at least comparatively easily. Broken dishes and windows come to mind as something that is more easily fixed. When the issue at hand is something like a broken promise, then it will take a very long time to fix. The last step, which is ongoing until death, is refraining from repeating that action.

An appropriate time to ask for forgiveness might be sometime during the fourth step. The person knows by then that you are not merely mouthing the words to have one less thing about which to be bothered, but that you are serious about your Teshuvah. Forgiving you at that point is more about removing the burden that maintaining a grudge imposes, so in addition to making up for the damage you did, you wind up helping the person whom you have harmed either directly or indirectly.

When you are the person who has been harmed, while you may decide to forgive before being asked in order to avoid that grudge burden, it is important not to express that forgiveness until the person who harmed you has asked to be forgiven. Pre-emptive forgiveness is harmful to the perpetrator, as it short-circuits their spiritual growth.

This spiritual growth is one of the points of Elul, the month leading up to Rosh HaShanah, as well as the next ten days until Yom Kippur. It is possible to coast through the High Holyday season. I could come to synagogue services during part of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, read once or more through the lists of various wrongful actions, and anticipate that God will know which ones I have committed and arrange for automatic atonement in order to show me how not to hold a grudge. I could even go to every service during the High Holyday season, and still imagine that God

is going to do all of the heavy lifting because this is God we are talking about, after all.

I believe that personal growth is lessened when that happens. If it is lessened when God is involved, I am pretty sure it is even more lessened when humans are on both sides of the equation.

Now, is there a time when coasting **is** appropriate?

Certainly.

When I have been grief-stricken, just showing up during the High Holiday season took all of my spiritual strength. Occasionally I could think a tiny bit about the words in front of me. I needed God to just know that I had nothing left at the moment, and that if anything spiritual was going to occur, God needed to pick up the slack. I have always felt that God does pick up the slack during those seasons.

While not forgetting those we have loved and lost, we eventually re-engage with life. Once we have re-engaged, continuing to coast during the High Holiday season and let God do all the work is another behavior for which we should do modified Teshuvah.

I recently thought of a similarity between cleaning for Pesach and reviewing ourselves for the High Holidays, which might help motivate us the rest of the year. When a person is much more organized than I have ever

been able to be, cleaning is a constant daily event. Each day everything visible is cleaned, and at least one area or room is deep cleaned. Many of us will clean the visible surfaces for Shabbat, and deep clean on a somewhat less than daily basis. Occasionally, cleaning consistently becomes one of those things that are given up to enable another dream to be fulfilled. When Passover rolls around the amount of extra work required to do an adequate cleaning job varies widely for each of these types. One problem with thinking that there is a shortcut to Passover cleaning is that the cleaner things are on a regular basis, the smaller the amount of dirt is that makes you think you need to clean again. So the same amount of work may wind up being done by both the person who cleans continuously and the person who waits until Purim to begin cleaning.

In a similar fashion, there are those righteous individuals who review their deeds every single day, noting where they are on their Teshuvah journey. Others do a weekly review of major guilty feelings and only occasionally review their Teshuvah status, and many review both issues somewhat less often. When the High Holyday season comes around, the amount of spiritual review is the same, but how much it will feel like extra work will change from person to person.

If this year has felt burdensome in terms of spiritual growth, perhaps that is a hint that waiting until next Rosh Hashanah rolls around to examine and work on your spiritual self might be a bit longer than desirable.