

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776

Shanah Tovah!

It is always appropriate at this particular service to briefly review what Teshuvah is. The word means returning, and is usually translated as repentance. The first step is to admit and acknowledge that something I have done is wrong. A behavior is thought to be wrong when I have broken something, I have harmed a person in some way, or I have fallen short in my duties as partner with God. The second step is to tell the other person that I have done something which harmed them in some fashion, and I regret it, and I then ask for their forgiveness. I ask, knowing that they are not obligated to forgive me. Fortunately, forgiveness does not change the effectiveness of Teshuvah one way or another. The third step in the process of Teshuvah is for me to fix what I have broken or repair the damage I did. The fourth step is never completed until I die, since the fourth step is to never repeat that behavior.

Most of our behaviors are subject to a complete four-step Teshuvah. Some aren't. If a person works on Teshuvah each year, then death and the year of spiritual purification fills in the gaps. In my own particular theology, neglecting to work on Teshuvah each year does not affect the afterlife – it just makes the life I am currently living more miserable.

One more brief statement – when my brother is harmed by somebody, I cannot forgive that person for the harm they have done my brother. I may internally opt against holding a grudge, so that if that person asks for my brother’s forgiveness and then mine, I may choose to give it. When a person has hurt **me**, I may also opt against holding a grudge, so that if that person asks my forgiveness I am likely to give it. I cheat the other person of their Teshuvah when I express my feelings concerning forgiveness before being asked. Should I do this, once I recognize the harm I have done, I would have to do Teshuvah for prematurely expressing forgiveness.

This difference in forgiveness concepts can result in negative comments about Jews or Judaism. It does not have to, but it can. The simplest statement in that direction would seem to be that Judaism is an unforgiving religion, since we don’t treat publicly forgiving people as a religious obligation. From there it is easy to develop a description of what an unforgiving people must be like, and then treat the members of that people accordingly.

I know that there are plenty of people who go through that particular thought process. I have a couple of relevant question:

Why jump from a difference in which particular action is chosen to a presumption about what a person who makes that particular choice is like?

Why, in the first place, do people often seem to presume that different action is automatically wrong?

Why presume that less than perfect behavior, when it comes from somebody else, requires judgment?

These questions bring me to another question, which I have found very difficult to figure out. What fuels the intense reaction to imperfection, when certain people exhibit it, yet doesn't fuel an equally intense reaction to imperfection when other people exhibit it? As an example, from the other side of the equation, in my family if my father thought I was doing something wrong I would come up with all sorts of reasons why he was wrong; if my grandmother thought I was doing something wrong I changed what I was doing, and felt bad to boot. The behavior under question might have been the same. The words used might have been the same. My reactions to those words about that behavior were mainly dependent upon the source of those words. When switching back in the direction under discussion, when certain people do something, we make excuses for them. We might say, "They didn't know any better." We might say, "That's not like

them!” We might even express the opinion, “They won’t listen to us anyway, so why worry about what they do?”

When our problem is with the action itself, then all people who exhibit that action should be equally vilified. When the action is the point, then it doesn’t matter if a very righteous person or a very wicked person is performing the action – the response should be the same.

Let us say that the problem is not the action, because I might be really uncomfortable considering the righteous and the wicked in the same breath. Perhaps it is fairer to take into consideration the kinds of actions a person performs consistently. It is important when doing this to compare apples and apples, so the actions we talk about should be similar in effect. For instance, the traffic citation for the mass murderer would then result in a higher assessed fine than a similar traffic citation for the average law abiding person.

What often happens instead is much trickier. Many people seem to base their reaction to a person’s performing a particular act upon the tendency of that person to normally not perform that act. Instead of the murderer receiving a higher fine for a traffic citation, as would be appropriate based on the wickedness of being a murderer, it is frequently the case that a law abiding person receives a greater fine for a traffic

citation than the mass murderer does. The logic appears to be that the law abiding person knows better than to behave that badly and the mass murderer does not, so the mass murderer does not deserve a greater consequence for behaving badly.

This way of looking at what people do is similar to what we do when we put somebody on a pedestal. When we put somebody up on that pedestal, we are usually quite aggravated when they step on the ground and get their gorgeous statue all muddy. Even if muddying their shoes is something that rarely happens, we respond to it as if it is the worst thing that has ever happened.

When the reaction to something which is done seems out of proportion to the effects of the deed, it is always possible that there is a bit of a pedestal effect going on. There are many Jewish philosophers who have detailed how this is one strand of anti-semitism.

To further explore this pedestal concept, let us say that somebody has you, personally, up on a pedestal for what everybody understands is a good reason. You actually happen to be more proficient than they are in some field. They support you, so that you can continue to be the proficient person that you are.

When somebody puts you on a pedestal, do you think you are on one? How would somebody else know that you know you are on one? Can you use that information to find other people who know they are on a pedestal?

This last question is my closing thought. When I am looking up at somebody, maybe any one of you, (for each of you are on a pedestal in comparison to myself in some fashion), do I try to be as good as you, or do I get angry when you prove to be as human as I am?

As possibly perpetually pedestaled people engaged in continuous examination of other pedestaled people, let us continually strive to grow towards goodness.