

# Rabbi's Column

## This is the Rabbi's Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Shanah Tovah!

In some ways I feel like the MC at the Melodrama, who said when I went, "If I tell a joke you have not heard already, then I am doing something wrong." If a sermon on Erev Rosh HaShanah is at all concerned about Rosh HaShanah, it is unlikely to be brand new in the cosmic sense. An individual might possibly not have heard about the ideas being discussed, but among the group here, several of you could possibly comment afterwards, "I'm sure I heard something like this before" – and that's not even considering the portion I deliberately repeat each year.

Still, just as the Holy Day season itself repeats annually, there are some things that I think we need to look at each year from our new vantage point. One of those things is Teshuvah, repentance.

Part of the idea of repentance is working towards Atonement – at-one-ment – with God. In the days of the TaNaCH this was most often done by bringing one of the requested items to feed the hungry – that is, the Kohanim and Levi'im. Which is partly why they were in charge of deciding if what you had brought granted you atonement. Bringing an inedible animal, or another item that was not permitted as a foodstuff, while possibly showing how much you knew you needed to get back in good with God and yourself, would not do the job because the point was not the bringing and preparation, but the proper consumption. We can learn from the concept of piggul – eating something that is past the due date which is three days after the barbecue. When somebody actually does this, it nullifies the entire offering retroactively.

In general, Teshuvah comes before atonement. In particular, the Ten Days of Repentance culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Just in case the busyness of the year might have made you forget, here is what Teshuvah is all about:

Recognize you messed up and admit it to yourself.

Apologize for what you did to the person whom you harmed.

Fix what was broken.

Never repeat that particular action.

One complication in interpersonal relationships is that an action which is relatively meaningless and completely harmless for you might be an action for which another person is doing Teshuvah. If somebody puts off doing something with you, and does not tell you why, and you are feeling no guilt in the relationship, there is always the possibility that when your friend blew you off it really had nothing to do with you, and is also none of your business.

While Judaism in general doesn't encourage making a resolution as such on Rosh HaShanah, sometimes it feels like our efforts to do better each year are exactly like a resolution. I am given to understand concerning resolutions, you can make far too many of them or take the single one you make to unusual

extremes. Some of the people in the neighborhood I live in seem to cater to the second style – based on their behavior, their resolution was to walk more each day. In order to do this, they park in front of somebody else’s doorway in a completely different section of the parking lot at best, and to a greater extreme, in a different apartment complex entirely. This allows them to do more walking, but is rather inconvenient for the person in front of whose door they have just parked, who probably had not made a resolution involving more walking – and might even have made a resolution involving getting places on time, and extra walking was not part of the plan.

When a person makes too many resolutions, there is just no time to work on all of them, and eventually – if you are like me – you just give up on almost all of them. Sometimes I even go too far in the other direction.

A person could also, of course, decide to make just one resolution, and then spend a bit of time figuring out the least amount of work that could be done and still have that resolution be considered accomplished.

I feel that both of these extremes should be avoided. I don’t know if it is exactly easy, yet the clearest way of knowing when enough is too much or not really enough is to focus on self-improvement. There is only one of each of us, after all.

Which is not at all the situation concerning all the things that require fixing in this world. No matter how much is accomplished, there is always something that did not get done, or did not get done properly. This even applies to self-improvement, as each time we get a bit better, we see how much better than that we could have been. So self-pacing, even when involved in self-improvement, is essential.

May each of us work on improving one thing about ourselves, and one thing about the world around us, and may none of us be damaged in a non-growthful way as we work. As mentioned in Pirkei Avot – the wisdom messages of the sages – you are under no obligation to complete any particular task, yet you may not use that realization to avoid the obligation to work at it.

Shanah tovah.