

HaShannah, The Year - Changing and Repeating

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775 - Sept. 24, 2014

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אָנִי יְשָׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֹר קוֹל דְּוִדִּי דוֹפֵק פֶּתַחַי לִי

I sleep but my heart is wakeful, the sound of my Beloved knocking, (saying) "open to me!"
(Song of Songs, 5:2)

That is the truth. We are in some kind of half-sleep, just awake enough to hear a knocking are we going to wake up enough to get out of bed and open the door?

Beloved knocking? G-d knocking? Or just your own intuition and better judgment trying to rouse us to action? None of it is easy. As Shakespeare observes:

I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow my own teaching. (Portia, Merchant of Venice Act I, Scene 2)

Our tradition recommends that for these next ten days, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, our strategy should be *Teshuvah*, *Tefilah* and *Tz'daka* - loosely translated: Repentance, Prayer and Making a Contribution.

I will talk at some point over the next ten days about all of those three: *Teshuvah*, *Tifilah* *u'Tzdaka*. Tonight I will focus on *Teshuvah* which is the most challenging and most specific to this time of year.

I want to start with something basic that is often confusing: Greetings. The basic greeting for this time of year is *Shanah Tovah* - Literally "Good Year!" or *l'Shanah Tovah* meaning "May you have a good year." If you want to give it a little something extra, try *l'Shanah Tovah u'Mitukah!* "Have a Good and sweet year!" And, more ambitious, *l'Shanah Tovah tiKatayvu*. "May you be written up for a good year!" This refers to the image from the Talmud of three books that stand open on Rosh Hashanah: one for the righteous, one for the wicked and one for the rest of us.

So it's *Shanah Tovah* on *Rosh haShanah*. This word in both "year," שָׁנָה (*shanah*), is interesting.

The root for שָׁנָה, has two seemingly contradictory meanings in both biblical and rabbinic Hebrew.

One meaning of שָׁנָה is repeat. It is where the number two comes from ShNaYim and also the name of the first book of Rabbinic literature the *Mishnah* which is from a style of learning where a line is recited by a teacher and repeated by a student. That is how our oral tradition was transmitted. The effort there is for an exact copy and fidelity to the original. A nice

example for the use of the word *and* some wisdom about *teshuva* from the Book of Proverbs [17:9]:

The one who overlooks faults [in another]
seeks love and the one who repeats a speech,
drives off a friend

מְכַסֶּה פֶּשַׁע מִבְּקֶשׁ אֶהְבֵּה;
וְשָׁנָה בְּדָבָר מִפְּרִיד אֵלּוּף:

[17:10 A rebuke comes down on a discerning person more than a hundred blows on a fool!]

וְשָׁנָה בְּדָבָר מִפְּרִיד אֵלּוּף

"One who *repeats* a speech, drives off a friend." That means the same speech over and over and over and over again. The meaning of "repetition" fits nicely with שנה as "year" since a year also repeats. In our bodies we feel it, that we are back again. The cool nights and crisp air and very distinct feeling of fall. Here we are again. Repeat.

Yet in addition, *Shanah* means to "change." The most familiar usage might be from Passover: Ma *Nishtanah* haLaila haZeh - why is this night *different*...?

In modern Hebrew, Shinui, means "change" Some of you will remember it was the name of an Israeli political party which was very strong and then, true to its name, disappeared.

There is a creative tension in שנה between of these two meanings: *Shanah* is both change/alter/transform *and* repeat/copy/duplicate. Seth Yorah informed me that the Sigmond Freud's 75th Yartzeit is on Yom Kippur, and I was thinking of Freud in connection with this word שנה and its seemingly contradictory meanings. In his General Introduction to Psychoanalysis discussing dream interpretation, Freud writes: "Many scholars who do research work in languages have maintained that in the oldest languages, opposites such as strong-weak, dark-light, little-big, were expressed by the same root word." (Introduction to Psychoanalysis p. 148/9) The example he gives of a word that survives with this dual meaning in English is "cleave" - meaning both split apart and fuse together.

That tension at the center, that apparent contradiction or paradox is not some anomaly but something fundamental in how the world works, and/or, how our minds work.

Notice that the atom, the fundamental unit in our model of physical reality is a unit which balances oppositional energies, positive and negative. When we dig down deeply and honestly within ourselves, we often find similar tensions and paradoxes. And for these, we need a cover story. That's not a bad thing, that's a practical necessity. It is exhausting to walk around with our paradoxes on display, we need to cover them up most of the time, but we should not lose our awareness that they are there.

So שנה is a great word for "year" because both things are true each year, it is the same, the same sequence of seasons, the earth comes back to (nearly) the same spot in relation to the sun. Of course in the Jewish year we are dancing with both sun and moon - (you will recall that last year Rosh Hashanah was just after Labor Day.)

And *שנה* is change - even if we were here every September 24th we are still in a different place, the earth is in about the same spot in relation to the sun, but the whole galaxy is moving at 490,000 miles/hour so in that sense, we're very far from where we last year. We are different, the community is different, the earth is different.

Each of us can say with absolute confidence, tonight and every night, "I am different than I was a year ago." This time of year is when we try to be more specific and fearless in understanding exactly *how* we are different. Not the external changes alone, but where have we changed emotionally and relationally in the hidden places where no one else has access.

How have we changed? Is it growth or deterioration? Is it deeper engagement or complacency? Those are truly hard questions to answer. Our success at answering them will depend on how much honest attention we give, particularly to those hidden parts of ourselves that are conflicted, unpleasant or embarrassing.

The process starts with reflection and regret. For this most of us need to get quiet. Turn off your cell phone. Turn it off as if you may never turn it on again. Take a walk with no destination. Give yourself some time.

We go looking for loose ends, places of discomfort; something we did or said we wish we had not. Something we didn't do or say we wish we had. Most of us are good at keeping the surface calm we are not even aware ourselves of pressures building within. Now is the time to get underneath the cover story.

This is especially hard since those cover stories are often bandages on broken places. We just read Psalm 51 with its dramatic reflection on *teshuva*. The closing verse points to what we are trying to find within ourselves and bring, as if we are bringing a sacred offering:

זָבַחַי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נִשְׁבְּרָה -- לִב־נִשְׁבֵּר וְנִדְכָּה אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְיָה:

"God's sacrifices are a broken spirit. A broken heart God will not reject." This is such a beautiful and dramatic statement since the traditional harvest or animal sacrifices had to be the finest without blemish. That is not what we are asked to bring in our prayer. We are asked to bring our unadorned, imperfect, broken selves.

The concern of this time of year is that we all have "sinned" (to use the traditional language), or if you prefer, we have allowed ourselves to get out of synch, estranged, we have "missed the mark." In ways big and small, things are not as they should be. Our tradition pushes us to take responsibility and try to set it right. Radical responsibility, like someone who picks up trash on the street and never says to herself "but I didn't put it there" But rather says "this is my street too." Radical responsibility that says, "that is my mess and my job to clean up."

The goal here is reconciliation and renewal. The idea is not to cultivate regret but articulate what went wrong and take responsibility for it so we can move on.

אָנִי יְשָׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֹר *Ani Yeshayna v'Libi Er*. Part of me is asleep. This time of year we try to rouse ourselves and to go a bit deeper like spiritual seismologists trying to get below the surface and see where the tensions have built up. Please know that lots of little earthquakes, ruptures, small releases of tension between tectonic plates, or between friends, or in families and communities are much less destructive than when tensions build to the point there their release causes destruction.

The work of teshuvah, of turning and returning is a powerful tool to release tension without destruction. But it is not easy. Isn't it amazing with all that has changed in the world, over the last several thousand years, that the process of teshuvah is still so so difficult. There is no Teshuvah app. No short cut.

The first song I remember knowing is "Rock o' My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" which to my delight Noa has started singing.

Rock a My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham, Oh Rock'a my soul. So high,
you can't get over it, So low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get
around it, you must go through the door.

In this case, that door is the Gate of Teshuvah which is wide open right now. The community will stand here together again in 10 days when we imagine that gate closing.

Our tradition offers us an opportunity to let ourselves enter this new year with intention and wakefulness. I wish us all the courage and creativity to look deeply and honestly within ourselves and so allow us to reconnect with those we love and make repair of frayed relations where ever we can make repair.

-- L' Shanah Tovah - to a good year of repeating what is vital and nurturing in your life and

--L' Shanah Tovah - to a good year of transformation and spiritual growth.

May you be fearless in your journey.