

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2022 - Imperfection

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Erev Tov, Shanah Tovah. As many of you know I like to use my first drash of the New Year to set a tone and, if I'm lucky, to provide a focus for these Ten Days of Teshuvah we are now beginning.

I want to begin by welcoming everyone here tonight, whether you are a long-term member or someone joining us for the first time. You are welcome here. Just in case you might be a little nervous. Maybe that self-judging voice inside your head (like it is in all our heads) is saying, "I don't really know why I'm here. I don't really know what to do." Relax, put those feelings aside. They serve no constructive purpose at all. If you are not sure what is going on you are not alone, and you have a few choices. One, you can listen to me as I periodically throw out a few words of explanation about why we do certain prayers during these holy days, or why they are rephrased, their goals, purpose and so on. Two, you can turn to the person next to you and ask them what is going on. You will probably have one of two pleasant surprises. First, the person will know the page we're on, what we are doing, and why, or some combination of the three and they will fill you in. Or, second, they won't have a clue either and you'll realize you're not alone. We have this tendency, in almost anything we do with which we are unfamiliar or unpracticed, to believe we are the only ones who don't know what's going on and everyone else is judging us. Believe me, none of us truly know what is going on and no one is judging you. We are just glad you are here. Remember that golden book you hold in your hands is our guide to these services. It is called a *mahzor*, which translates to cycle. It holds within it the collective wisdom and spiritual practice of the Jewish people from antiquity through today: the cycle of the holidays and the cycle of the prayers we engage with during the holidays. *Mahzor* is also related to the verb *lahzor*, to return: as we return to these Holy Days year after year throughout our lifetime, as those who came before us did throughout their lifetimes over the ages, and, God willing, our children and their children will continue to do throughout time.

So, in this acknowledgement of return, I want to recognize what a wonderful feeling it is to be back inside our little synagogue this year for the Chagim. What a strange three years it has been. Two years ago, at the beginning of the Covid Pandemic, we closed down in-person services in the Spring of 2020 and went to online services. That year we held our High Holy Day Services completely online and sent special boxes to all of you with different materials and activities so we could try to stay connected. We spent a great deal of time and money on producing the event which, I think, went pretty well considering the circumstance. Last year we held services here, in-person, and outside with a professionally produced online presence. For those of us who were here in person you will remember that Rosh Hashanah had really nice weather and Yom Kippur may have been the coldest day on record. We were all freezing. By the way, if you don't believe in Climate Change, let me remind you, as a Bay Area native that Yom Kippur was for most of my life one of the hottest days of the year. Now it seems to be becoming one of the coldest. But, we installed a new HVAC system this year, which filters our air to keep us safe and keeps us warm or cool as needed. We still have some Covid safety procedures in place, but I hope that this year will mark the final step of integration back into our normal lives. We do not know what will be. For, as we have learned over and over again over these past years, our predictive powers are severely limited. Yet I hope this will be so. Two of the important practices of the Holy Days are *hakarat todah* and *hakarat ha tov*: gratitude and recognizing the good in life. So let us take a moment to focus on how far we have come, how much safer we all are, and give thanks to those who have helped us deal with this horrible disease.

As I mentioned a moment ago, I like to provide a focus or a theme for these Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*) and this year I would like to suggest we focus on imperfection: our own imperfection, that of others, and the imperfections of our society writ large. In a fundamental way the High Holy Days exist because we, mortal, human beings are imperfect by design. If we were perfect we would not need the process of *teshuvah*, of return. We would not need to examine our thoughts and deeds and decide how we want to grow and improve. Just as a beginner's mind and curiosity are essential prerequisites

for learning, so imperfection is the essential prerequisite for teshuvah. I just mentioned that we all have a voice in our heads that narrates and judges everything we do. Maybe, I should be careful here and specify that I know I have such a voice in my head and I assume you do too, but I could be wrong about you. That voice is always saying to me, you should work harder, you should know more, you should be more sensitive, you should be doing this or that to make your life better, to be a better citizen, to be a better person. So how do we quiet that voice, without stilling the motivation to continue to grow as people? For, according to our tradition, we are flawed but we are not bad. We are not where we might want to be, or could be, but we are always in the process of becoming.

According to Jewish tradition God baked imperfection into us. Adam and Eve lived in Paradise, *Gan Eden*, and they had one command only, don't eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. They did anyway! Just one commandment, and they couldn't keep it. They broke it. Thus human history began. So don't feel bad if you don't (take your pick) exercise enough, eat the proper types of food in their proper proportions, have problems with your parents, your children, your partner, your relatives, your friends. Your life is more complicated than Adam and Eve's was and they couldn't keep it together. So how can we? And, ever since that first expulsion from the Garden of Eden we have been trying, in the words of Jonie Mitchell, "to get ourselves back to the garden."

In the story of Noach, after the flood has subsided and Noah has made a thanksgiving sacrifice, God says, "Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done." At this moment God recognizes that imperfection is an essential part of being human. We are endowed with an inclination to do good (the *yetzer ha tov*) and an inclination to do evil (*yetzer ha rah*). Just to make things more complicated, our sages of blessed memory believed the evil inclination the *yetzer ha rah* was what motivated human beings to fall in love, to have children, to create societies, to build businesses. The *yetzer ha rah*, if channeled properly, is what drives us to accomplish things in life. So our imperfections may be what drive us. They certainly

drive us to change, when we realize they are leading us to ruin... unless of course we welcome self destruction.

If you are not convinced, consider that all our so-called heroes and role models in the Bible are deeply flawed. Abraham, who pretends Sarah is not his wife (twice) putting her in profound danger and sexual jeopardy and who almost kills both his sons, Sarah who is deeply jealous of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Isaac who can't see his sons' true character and is blind to their flaws. Rebecca who favors Jacob over Esau and deceives her husband Isaac to secure his blessing for Jacob. Jacob who is probably the worst parent ever (exceeded perhaps only by his grandfather Abraham). Moses, possessed of a wicked temper, when not wracked with self-doubt and insecurity (even though he talks directly to God). Pretty much all of the judges (especially Samson) excluding Deborah. King Saul, who suffers from weakness of character and blinding jealousy, King David (perhaps the most compelling of all since he is so spiritually deep and so deeply flawed) who commits adultery and sets up his lover's husband's death in battle. King Solomon (greed, insatiable lust, and idol worship)... The list goes on and on. The list continues in the Rabbinic tradition. Rabbi Alisha ben Abuyah who loses his faith and becomes an apostate. Shimon bar Yochai, who hides from the Romans in a cave for twelve years and then emerges only to be disgusted by the worldly behavior of his fellow Jews and starts burning down everything he sees with his eyes. You think you have issues. Take a moment to reflect on this list of deeply flawed people.

Our tradition does not try to hide the flaws of our heroes and role models. They are our role models precisely because they are flawed. On the one hand we can relate to them because they are imperfect, just like us, with their strengths and weaknesses. They are not saints. They are role models because not only do they struggle with their imperfections. The best of them grow. Like Judah who sells his brother Joseph into slavery because of his jealousy but, over time and accumulated life experience, becomes a man of character and empathy willing to trade his own life for his youngest brother Benjamin. Or David, who, when confronted with his crimes, admits his guilt and strives to repent and reconnect with God. Or Shimon bar Yochai, who after being sent

back into the cave by God for another year reemerges with empathy for common people who must balance their spiritual lives with the need to make a living and support their families. We do not worship models of perfection. We worship flawed human beings who show the capacity and the willingness to change and grow.

A desire for perfection is unattainable and dangerous. We want to be perfect parents who raise perfect children, and live perfect lives. This doesn't make us better people, it creates anxiety and insecurity. We see it in leaders who make mistakes and then double down rather than admit their mistakes and move on: the Vietnam War comes to mind as just one example. Or, even worse, we have politicians today who flaunt their moral, emotional failings, their corrupt or criminal behavior but never take responsibility for their actions and make a virtue out of their unwillingness to change.

These High Holy Days offer all of us an alternative view of life. We are all imperfect, endowed with wonderful, positive qualities and great strengths; all suffering from limits in judgment, emotional and psychological blind spots, and false assumptions. We see things our own way. We hurt others: sometimes unintentionally at other times on purpose. We can be courageous one moment, terrified the next. We can be caring and indifferent. This is the nature of being human. Judaism accepts this but assumes we want to be good, that we want to do good, but that we will fall short. Despite our best efforts. This is the best definition of sin (or *cheit*) in Judaism. Falling short of the mark, like an arrow that fails to reach its target.

Knowing this, Judaism gives us a process for change, *teshuvah*, or return. It is something we can do (should do) every day, but these next 10 days are a time of particular opportunity.

The High Holy Days invite us to embrace our imperfections, to admit that we are far from perfect, but that we are always capable of changing, of growing and of becoming, up until the day we die. More importantly, we must accept the imperfections in others. Recognize that we are all going through life, trying to do the best we can and failing. If

we think otherwise we set ourselves up for disappointment and suffering. Because this is how human beings are and to expect otherwise is to see the world not as God created it, but as we wish it to be. And, unless we are willing to change we cannot expect others to do so. That is why forgiveness is such an essential Jewish value. To forgive another is to recognize their flawed nature, their inherent humanness and to assume that they want to do better... just like us. Is there any other way to view the world?

Maimonides says that we should assume that God's scales of judgment on us are evenly balanced. Just one action, whether for good or for ill, will tip them one way or the other. In other words, we have agency. Our actions matter and can make a difference. So then, what is the one thing each of us will do today, tomorrow, for the next ten days, and the rest of the year that will tip the scales toward growth, change and a better world for all?

Judaism does not believe that we are the way we are; that we are doomed to repeat our mistakes. Rather, we are always capable of growth and change and we can choose how we want to be. Nothing is set in stone. We are always in process. It may not be easy, most important things in life never are. But it is possible. This is Judaism's optimistic view of human nature. We are imperfect. We are deeply flawed. We are capable of growth and change.

What choice do we want to make this year? How do we want to tip the scales? Let's accept our imperfections today and strive to be better tomorrow. Shannah tovah u'metukah. May we all have a good and sweet New Year.