



Assistant Rabbi Benjamin Ross

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“Change You Can Believe In”

My two-year-old son Zeke is an emergent oracle of sorts. I can go to him with the hardest of life questions, and he reliably gives me one of two answers, an affirmative somewhat germanic “Yah,” or a sweet definitive, “Nope!”

So I asked Zeke, “Can people change?” Silence, then, “Nope.”

This was not the answer that I was hoping for. His “nope” is how we all feel most days, we question, “Can we really change?”

These holy days urge us to believe in our capacity to transform, for our world to transform, and that the two are inter-connected. We begin by digging deep and reflecting on the past year, if not on the totality of our very existence, and ask, am I the person I aspire to be? Am I doing enough to make the world into the place I want to leave to the next generation? Where did I fall short? How can I make amends and change the behavior that is not serving me?

What if we believed, without a doubt, that we could actually emerge out of these ten days of teshuvah and act in a way that was aligned with our best self; not for the purpose of merely being a fully actualized human, which *halavai*, would be pretty good, but also for the purpose of fueling our individual capacity to be a force for goodness, for justice, for compassion, for dignity in this world?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “If a person were able to survey at a glance all she has done in the course of her life, what would she feel? She would be terrified at the extent of her own power.”

Power cuts both ways. We want to be powerful – to feel like we have agency and the ability to act. We certainly do not want to feel powerless – when it comes to our own lives, bodies, family, workplace, or the fragile world in which we live. Yet, mostly we experience powerlessness when we survey the suffering in the world.

We fill our lives, we busy ourselves, so as to not attend to our own brokenness, and the brokenness of the world. This is all subterfuge to avoid the painful bits in our lives, in the world, even as they overwhelm and debilitate us. And then, when our avoidance leaves us littered with the pain we have sought to flee, that pain manifests itself as limitations which conceal our innate goodness, unwholesome actions that emerge from our own suffering, our sense of not having enough, craving to be seen, our aversion to what makes us uncomfortable, and holding tight to misguided impressions.

Our suffering is just the way we are human with these amazing and also challenged brains.

Yet, our greatest power exists in our ability to choose *how* we act; the choices we make or run from making, the votes we cast or don't cast, in how we love or are spiteful in relationships, how we are generous or denying with workmates, how we lovingly rebuke or retreat in fear to those with authority, how we show up or hide in our friendships, and how we own our power and privilege or subvert our power as injustices occur all around us.

We make hundreds of these split second choices every day. And often, we dupe ourselves into thinking they are not choices, and we do not make them.

Today we begin the ten days of *teshuvah*, of turning ourselves and our lives, of taking stock of who we are and who we seek to be, and commit to move closer to our aspirational selves. *Teshuvah* is about owning our actions. Releasing everyone and all the excuses for why something is and just owning our role. In this, there is real liberation. We are meant to be tenacious and loving in our examination. *Teshuvah* is about moving to a place of profound joy and generosity.

When we actually assess our failures, seek forgiveness, from ourselves, from others and God – as well as accept the sincere repentance of others – we are refreshed. It is like a spiritual juice cleanse. Maybe it doesn't feel so good while you are in it – and it is too intense to do all the time – but when you do it you can truly emerge lighter, loosened, and liberated.

For me, one of the hardest parts of *teshuvah* is that it is not always clear how you get there. Who are the teshuvah all-stars? Who are the icons of *teshuvah* that we can all look toward as guides on our own path?

Imagine the Topps *Teshuvah* playing cards:

Deena Goldberg: Sought to make amends with over fourteen friends and colleagues.

Jason Perlmutter: Highest percentage of accepted requests for forgiveness – with 36 in Elul alone.

Delila Khalidi: Actually started being kind to her sister who she deeply resents.

Billy Ratzinger: Stopped trying to change his father and accepted him for who he was, for the second year in a row!

This year, what would you like to see on the back of your *teshuvah* playing card?

Lacking Topps *Teshuvah* transformation cards, we tend to elevate those who are on the actual Topps cards... sports heroes, as what they are able to do physically and mentally seems like one of the best representations of self-actualization, at least on the level of physical if not spiritual and moral excellence. Their statistics enable us to discern “bestness” as we can easily compare statistics against others. Few all-stars will ever come close to Wilt Chamberlain and the awesome sauce that seemed to flow through the veins of this basketball great who once scored 100 points in a single game.

Malcolm Gladwell, in reflecting on Chamberlain’s success, notes he made 28 of 32 free throws that record-shattering game; a remarkable feat for any pro ball player but particularly for Chamberlain, who shot 50% over the course of his career. On this magical night, what made him shoot 87% from the free throw line, and achieve his best? The magic, on this night, was that he shot underhanded – whereas most ball players shoot with their hands up. For this game, and much of that season, Wilt shot his free throws underhanded.

Free throws were Chamberlain’s only weakness as a ball player. He was virtually unstoppable. But from the free throw line he was legitimately horrible – a real liability to his team. But in one season, and on this one night, he was nearly invincible.

Gladwell reflects in amazement, “Then, inexplicably, Wilt Chamberlain stops shooting underhanded. And what happens? He goes back to being a terrible foul shooter.”

Gladwell continues: “Let’s think about what he did for a moment. Chamberlain had a problem. He tested out a possible solution. The solution worked. And all of a sudden, he’s fixed his biggest weakness as a player. This is not a trivial matter.”

In our own lives how often do we know what works – we know the solution – we know the path to *teshuvah*, to making amends, to asking for forgiveness – and we stop ourselves. What stops us? What stopped Chamberlain?

Reflecting on when he stopped shooting underhanded, Chamberlain wrote in his 1975 autobiography, “I felt silly, like a sissy, shooting underhanded. I know I was wrong. I know some of the best foul shooters in history shot that way. Even now, the best one in the NBA, Rick Barry, shoots underhanded. I just couldn’t do it.”

Being seen as a sissy was a threshold for Chamberlain, one he couldn’t cross. It was about his ego. About what manhood looked like.

Whereas Rick Barry was all about winning. Barry would have shot the ball while sticking his thumb in his mouth if it meant he would win. For Chamberlain, the motivation to cross that threshold – was not sufficient.

We all have our own thresholds. They are not permanent or set. I think of them as the intersection of our fears and our motivations.

Of course, some thresholds are healthy. We don't dash across Sepulveda Boulevard and dodge oncoming traffic to stroll around the Getty gardens. Of course, if my son Reuven, God forbid, raced into ongoing traffic, my motivation would overcome any reasonable threshold and I would rush into the street to save him.

While some thresholds protect us, our tradition's call to seek and provide forgiveness for our failures, necessitates we question the thresholds that inhibit us.

I'm constantly failing to make my way through thresholds in my life. Liz and I recently set aside specific mornings to go to the gym or out for a run while the other prepares the kids for school, at our temple's Leonard I. Beerman Early Childhood Center, which – just to say – is amazing. Ok, back to the sermon.

Sadly, our brilliant calendar innovation worked exactly twice. Then the thresholds overcame my motivation. I'm too tired, the kids are too crazy to leave, I'm hungry, I really should get to work early, I'd like more time with the boys, I really want to sleep more, on and on.

Mostly, I'm not even so conscious of my chosen rationalization, I just don't go. I lack the motivation to move through all the excuses.

Now, I know many of you don't seem to face this barrier. You work out all the time. It must be a West Coast thing I have yet to assimilate after a lifetime in pasty, hardscrabble New York City. Possibly you have other points of growth out here?

My path to stand before you today emerged from a different experience. The idea to become a rabbi occurred at the end of a week-long silent meditation retreat.

I was sitting, after praying the morning worship service by myself, when it just arose, softly and suddenly, "Be a rabbi." I was as surprised as the bees buzzing by. And then I had a full second and a half to breathe it in.

And just as quickly, on came the thresholds – the fears – who are you to hear voices, and as for this particular voice... you are too old, you won't learn Hebrew, it is too expensive, you are not a leader, you will be out of the social justice movement for too long. Some of those fears were about what I couldn't be and others were about loss if I was to become rabbi.

The gift of awareness in that moment allowed me to both hear the "Be a rabbi" and also not be totally crushed by fears. In that moment I was able to gather them up, and hold them gently, not letting them take the air out of my *nefesh*, my soul. The propulsion of my motivation to be a rabbi allowed me to move through those thresholds, to see the fears and not be dissuaded, discouraged, or defeated.

Our own tradition teaches about this battle of ego and thresholds, literal and figurative.

Rabbi Yacov Yosef of Poloyne, a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov in the 18th century, writing in what is considered the first Hassidic book ever published, comments on the Talmudic (Shabbat 33b) tale of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, who hid from Roman persecution in the 2nd century in a cave. They hid there for twelve years, sustained by water and a carob tree just outside their cave, and the nourishment of study.

As the story goes, when they learn that all is safe to leave, they pack up their stuff and head out. Rabbi Yakov Yosef continues, as translated by my teacher Rabbi Jonathan Slater, "When they emerged from the cave they saw people 'forsaking eternal life to engage in transient things,' (transient acts like plowing and planting their fields), and whatever they looked at was consumed in fire.

'They aroused destruction in the world, and a heavenly voice came forth and said: 'Do you wish to destroy My world? Return to your cave.' So they returned to their cave and twelve months later they emerged with compassion, and wherever they went they brought blessing to the world."

Rabbi Yakov Yosef interprets Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his son as having a narrow understanding of *avodah* – of the offering God is seeking. They think the highest *avodah* is "Torah study, prayer, fasting in tears and the like."

Hence, when they emerge from their cave and see folks plowing and planting seeds they are furious, judging it as frivolous. "Their intolerance increased anger in the world, until a divine voice told them to return to their cave. They then sensed that this was to teach them a better way, a way of compassion."

Rabbi Yakov Yosef reflects, "It appears ... that this is how to behave, with compassion toward all others.

Even when you see something ugly (or painful) or unbecoming in another person, you should turn your heart to thinking that the Holy One dwells there too, since there is no place devoid of God. It is therefore for your good that you have seen this, since you have some aspect of this same ugliness (and pain) in you as well, and this will move your heart to *teshuvah*."

This is such a beautiful and agitational teaching. Of course, we all know, it is easier to help others see their thresholds and fears, and urge them to move through them, than it is to see our own. And, we are much better at seeing others' ugliness when it is part of us as well, even when we don't want to admit it.

A critical element of the teaching is that God is in that ugliness – hard as that is for us to believe when we are staring at it with revulsion. "The Holy One dwells there," – in that place of ugliness – "as no place is devoid of God."

This text urges us to look right into our pain, the dysfunctional relationships, the bad choices, and all the thoughtless, unthinking, insensitive, selfish, self-centered, unkind, uncharitable, impolite, discourteous, and disrespectful acts. In those places, we will find God. And so when we work through them, we move closer to God – and God moves closer to us.

This is actually work of joy, not drudgery. Work of liberation, not debilitation.

We make a big deal of doing *teshuvah*, because too often there is not a second chance. We don't control when people enter and leave our lives, to believe so is to tell yourself a fable, "I'll take care of that relationship next year." Our lives are fleeting.

As the psalmist writes, "Happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over. Happy is the one whom Adonai does not hold guilty, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1-2)

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was sent back into the cave because he lacked compassion. When he emerged again, his compassion was a source of nourishment, for himself, others, and for God. God does not seek that we study in a cave for twelve years. God demands that we see our failures, as my friend Hilly Haber says, as moments of divine friction.

Divine friction is when we face an uncomfortable truth and move into it, and then through it, with the love of God, with compassion for ourselves and others.

If Wilt Chamberlain could have named his discomfort and moved through it, he would have confronted his greatest fear, and possibly God, and likely faced himself and others with greater compassion.

We come together today, on Rosh Hashanah to affirm that we are able to make these changes, to do *teshuvah*, to move through our individual thresholds of resistance and fear. We come together today to motivate one another.

We all have set the world ablaze with our judgment and fear. We move in and out of our caves, be it our homes or our cars, hiding from one another, from confronting our suffering. But when we bump into others, when our personalities rub up against one another, there is divine friction. And if we do not meet it with compassion – if we do not allow ourselves to release old pains, to reset ourselves, to ask for forgiveness and to accept the request from others, we remain in the cave, or worse...

We ignite the world with our anger and fury, and our fear cannot transcend the thresholds that limit our own *teshuvah* and effectiveness in the world.

Now this may be difficult, and it most certainly will be awkward, but I invite you to take a moment to feel, and draw on, the depth of belief in our capacity to change present in this sanctuary.

Take in the boundless compassion and shared suffering present in this holy space.

Consider the thresholds to *teshuvah* that you face and the strength you need to confront them and move through them.

Commit yourself to the *teshuvah* you need to do, and affirm others in their capacity to do their own work.

Use the next thirty seconds of silence to gaze around this room... possibly even into a few of the eyes of those nearest to you – don't feel compelled to look quickly away...

We are not alone, we are together. We all are suffering and *teshuvah* can alleviate our pain. We are moving from darkness to light. We are out of the cave and crossing the threshold hand in hand.

*Hayom Harat Olam:*

"Today the world trembles; Today the world is born." (Rabbi Simon Jacobson)

Shanah tovah!