

The Five Stages of Teshuva – Made Eas(ier)

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My story begins three weeks before the High Holidays. With outdoor swimming pools open this summer in Toronto where I live, I took advantage of this opportunity and was thrilled to be back in the water after a year and half of not being able to swim. During that sweltering wave of high temps we had in August, the pool was my refuge to beat the heat. Because of Covid, swimming pool capacity is limited, and on one of those hot summer mornings, I missed the cut off to get into the pool. Hot, sweating and uncomfortable, I let my frustration out on the hapless lifeguard who was only doing his job to make sure the pool area conformed to Covid conditions. I put up enough of a fuss that required his supervisor to get involved. Eventually after enough griping, I was allowed in. But that wasn't enough to satisfy me. Because I realized I did something very wrong. I took out my frustration on someone who didn't deserve it. With about three weeks to go until the High Holidays when we atone for our sins and ask G-d for forgiveness for our errant ways, I immediately reminded myself of what I needed to do. I needed to make amends with that young lifeguard. In other words, I needed to go through the "Five Stages of Teshuva" – the "Five Steps of Return to Wholeness."

The first two, were easy and effortless enough, from a mental perspective. In fact, I had already accomplished stage one – "Hakarat HaChet" or "Awareness of the Sin." I knew I messed up. I acknowledged to myself that I let my frustrations out on that young man who was simply trying to do his job. And the 2nd stage, "Charata" or "Regret" was just as easy to admit to. I felt badly that this lifeguard was the object of my frustration, fatigue, and weather related discomfort.

But from then on, it got more difficult. That's because stage three, required me to go beyond the mental awareness and regret I felt for what I did. "Viddui" or "confession" in stage 3, requires us to go from the cerebral to the real – the real act of asking forgiveness to the person we injured; of apologizing for our misdeed, our hurt, our sin. And that's where it got tough, because who likes to apologize? Who likes to admit we are wrong? Even when we know we are wrong (as I acknowledged in stages 1 and 2), the act of saying "I'm sorry" is not easy. But I owed that to him and apologized. But why, I asked myself, is this so hard to do? The answer came in an article I found online, written by Karina Schumann, PhD, of the Department of Psychology at Stanford University. Apologies require us to admit our moral failings. We like to think of ourselves as moral, ethical good people. But when we screw up, the recognition that we did something wrong, that we may have hurt someone, flies in the face of our self-image as a good person. So, we are less motivated to apologize because that contradicts the way we like to see and feel about ourselves.

But here's the thing. As difficult as it is, if there was ever a time of year to apologize, where that sense of humiliation and blow to our ego is less severe, it's now – during the "Aseret Yimei Teshuva" – the "10 Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur." Why? Because we are all in the same boat during these ten days. All of us have someone to apologize to; something to apologize for. So these ten days can be seen as the great equalizer. We are all and collectively guilty of hurting someone over the past year. The person to whom we should be offering an apology, should also be offering a

similar apology to someone else. That each and every one of us has the same obligation to ask for forgiveness, levels the playing field. And so while asking someone for forgiveness is always humbling, even humiliating, knowing that we are *all* obligated at this time of year to do just that, may make it a bit easier to actually do. And on the flip side, it makes it easier for the recipient to accept the apology too, knowing that he himself or she herself has their own apologies to extend to someone else

And after apologizing? Steps three and four are no less easy but can be successfully implemented with some creativity and imagination.

“Azivat Hachet” or “Leaving behind the Sin” involves a commitment to not repeat that same behavior that triggered the apology. And Step four, an extension of “Aziva Hachet” is called “Kabbalah L’Atid” or “accepting the future” referring to stepping into the future with positive intentions to do better in the coming year.

But good intentions are just that...intentions. As humans we are all fallible. We know, despite our best intentions, that we will make mistakes in the coming year. We will sin. Chances are, we may likely hurt someone again too. So how can we improve the odds of successfully leaving behind the sin and moving positively into the future? With a simple activity aimed to remind us throughout the year of our intent to leave behind the sin.

Pick one thing you want to improve on; one shortcoming you want to change; one sin you want to leave behind to move confidently into the new year. Now take two small pieces of paper. And on each piece, write down that one trait you want to change, or that one sin you want to not repeat and fold it up.

Now take out your Chanukkah menorah wherever it’s stored and stick one of those notes into your Menora. Three months from now, as you prepare to light the Chanukkah candles, that note will be there to remind you of the commitment you made back in September to change that one behavior and surrender that one sin. How are you doing on that intent? This three-month check-in is a good way to see if you are still on track, still adhering to steps 3 and 4 of the Teshuva process.

And the second piece of paper? That goes inside your Passover Hagaddah, that you will take out next April when we all sit down for a Passover seder. Out from your Haggadah will fall that note you wrote a half year prior, that you may have even forgotten about by then; that note to remind you of your commitment and to help you get back on track if necessary to your Rosh Hashanah resolution at the half way point of the Jewish calendar.

With this strategy in mind, fulfilling the Five Stages of Teshuva becomes not just an admirable yet hard to practice idea, but rather a practical, achievable year-round personal Mitzvah project that is bound to leave you feeling more than just a sense of accomplishment, but feeling a greater sense of connection to our Jewish souls. And in the end isn’t it our souls that the restorative process of Teshuva is ultimately designed to heal?

Shana Tova.