

*Temple B'nai Abraham
Erev Rosh Hashanah
Rabbi Max Edwards
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Shanah Tovah,

Two merchants were traveling together to a market in order to purchase a few items which they would eventually bring to sale, each merchant carrying with them a considerable sum of money.

Feeling weary, they stopped at an inn to lodge and placed their money under their pillows. They awoke at daybreak and went on their way, forgetting to take their money with them.

When they discovered their loss, one of the merchants suggested, "Let's hurry on because it will soon be market day."

The other responded, "What do you mean? What good will it do for us to hurry now that we are empty-handed? We must turn back and search for our money on every road we took; after we find the money, we'll travel to the market.

This old rabbinic parable asks a timeless question, a question resting on the heart of our entire world. Do we move forward, into the market, into the world as it is, bereft of the treasures upon which we built our previous lives, or do we attempt to go back? Do we attempt to gather and regather our world as it was, running that risk the we may come up empty handed?

Rosh Hashanah is a day that lies in between this binary. Tractate Rosh Hashanah in the Talmud tells us that we as a people exist in a suspended state during the High Holidays. Between two worlds. Between the year to come and the year that was.

Tonight, I want to explore what it might mean to return, to gather, to search, by looking closely with all of you at the first half of the following verse: Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha V'nashuva. Return to us, Adonai, and we will return to you.

On Kol Nidre, after journeying through the 10 days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we'll look at the second half of this verse, Hadesh Yameinu K'kedem, Renew our days like that of old, and we'll imagine together the world that will be.

This verse comes from the Book of Lamentations, the final verse that is read on Tisha B'av, the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple that precedes Rosh Hashanah by exactly seven weeks - a perfect sabbatical cycle of 49 days, seven by seven - a move from spiritual desecration to spiritual redemption.

Tisha B'av in many ways kicks off the season of the high holidays, and this verse from the end of Lamentations - Return to us, Adonai, and we will return to you - becomes the calling card, the north star, of our entrance into the High Holiday season.

So let's take a closer look.

The idea in the verse of a mutual returning, both of God and humanity, not only the Jewish people but the entire world, is covenantal in nature; it is an agreement that dates all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, the moment when the floodwaters subside, leaving Noah and his family, finally, in a state of security.

It is in this post-destruction world that a new partnership is born. God demands of the people to avoid bloodshed and war, in the form of a couplet, saying "Whoever sheds the blood of a person, By another shall their blood be shed; For in God's image Did God make humankind.

שִׁפְךָ דָם הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָךְ כִּי בְצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם:

And in turn, God demands of Godself the following: "I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

It is God's way of saying: So long as you yourselves don't engage in acts of violence, neither will I. It is a partnership in a post-destruction world. It's these moments, in the wake of devastation, where the covenant comes to gather the shards of the broken, to guide the world back toward a modicum of balance.

There is a shared responsibility. We put our trust in God, and God places God's trust in humanity. The covenant soothes destruction, in part, because through it, humanity is given a purpose, a role in the unfolding narrative of what is to come.

So too is it here, on Rosh Hashanah, that our liturgy asks us to explore what renewed sense of purpose is in store for us in the year to come. The High Holidays might be viewed as a set of days crafted for us to experience a post-destruction world. It is a time of retrospection and mourning, a time of renewal and creation.

This verse hashiveinu asks that God take the first step back to us. Return to us, Adonai, and we will return to you. Our turn toward God is dependent on God's turn toward us. It's covenantal. It is a turning that is reminiscent of the same word in Psalm 23 - The Lord is my shepherd - a psalm that we might be used to hearing at funerals and shivas. Within that Psalm, we read: Nafshi y'shovev- y'shovev - a word that shares the same root as hashiveinu - God is the restorer of souls.

And as our rabbis in the talmud would say: למאי נפקא מינא? What may we practically derive from this? Or in other words, how do we know when God has taken the first step toward us?

We must capture and give space to those moments this coming year that are nafshi y'shovev - that are soul restorative. That just might be where God's first step may be found.

We now find ourselves in a world where small joys, moments that capture our hearts and bring us toward a feeling of completeness, are more important than ever.

And I say moments, because every other day there are competing op-eds in the news that seek to look deep into the future toward what will be: They say things like: "Covid is here to stay and what to do about it" - alongside something like "The worst is behind us and how to gain normalcy." If there's one thing we've learned, it's that the world changes on a dime.

Our masks are not resting in our 2020 time capsules like I and so many others thought they'd be at this point last year.

We're in a world where the moments when we feel hashiveinu, when we feel God returning to us, nafshi y'shovev, restoring our souls, are the moments that will help to drive us forward, again, through these upcoming winter months. Last year we hoped; this year we return, a spiritual return to our place of comfort.

One of my theological rebbes, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, writes on how God is "the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos."

May this year be the year we make a cosmos out of chaos. One need not look too far to find the chaos, but to find God, to find, as Kaplan writes, the Power that makes for salvation, is to find those moments of humanity, family, and love - the cosmos.

That is hashiveinu adonai eilecha. That is God turning toward us, and that is the occasion to be v'nashuva, to find oneself turning toward that divine energy.

At the end of Tractate Chagigah in the Babylonian Talmud, there is a discussion about the sacrificial altar that once stood in the temple. The Talmud quotes a verse from the Book of Ezekiel, wherein the Prophet Ezekiel has a vision. In his vision he is transported to the Land of Israel where the destroyed Temple is magically rebuilt.

A man glowing of bronze shows Ezekiel around the Temple, relaying the most specific details of the structure, on the condition that Ezekiel keep this blueprint until the time is right for the Temple to be rebuilt.

The verse quoted from Ezekiel reads: A wooden altar, 3 cubits high and 2 cubits long and having inner corners; its length and its walls were of wood. And he said to me, "This is the table that stands before the LORD."

The Rabbis of the Talmud are perplexed. How can the verse about the Temple's altar begin with the word altar, a holy terminology, but end with the word table, a more mundane rendering? Which is it?

Rabbi Yochanan & Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish respond to the Talmud's inquiry:

When the Temple in Jerusalem stood, the altar would atone for everyone. Now, since the Temple has been destroyed, it is a person's table that makes atonement.

And how does a table make for atonement? By using it as a vessel to welcome guests, and to feed the hungry. In other words, to create a cosmos from the chaos.

This coming year, may we all be blessed with the awareness to take in the moments of divine light that we so greatly need. Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha V'nashuva. May God's return toward us cause us to move even closer to our covenantal partner, our source of creation and our source of strength.

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Shanah Tovah