

Seven Things I've Learned About Teshuvah from (Not) Moving

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As many of you know from various postings that Gina and I have sent to the Dorshei Tzedek listserv in recent months, we are in the process of selling our house in Lexington and purchasing a new home in Waltham. It's a fairly complex and emotional process, so a few months ago I decided it would be a good topic to explore during the High Holydays. My topic for this evening is:

"Seven Things I learned about Teshuvah from Moving."

#1: We haven't moved.

Although we did purchase a lovely new townhouse in June, we have so far been unable to find a buyer for our current home. For a variety of reasons, we've decided that for the time being it makes sense to rent the new place, and stay in Lexington while we keep our house on the market. So we haven't moved.

The lesson here seems to be that despite our best intentions, sometimes things just don't work out the way we'd planned. Every year Rosh Hashanah rolls around, and we're still not perfect, even though we had such good intentions last year! Maybe we came up for an aliyah to the Torah to take on a new commitment, or we did some deep reflection here in shul or at home and said, this I'll do differently this year. I'll gossip less, I'll give more tzedakah, I'll recycle more, I'll be kinder to myself, to my family members. I'll get more politically active, I'll come home from work earlier, I'll take better care of my body. I will be a better person in the new year.

And the truth is we probably did make a good effort, and maybe even achieved some of what we hoped. But here we are again--still flawed, still not as compassionate or giving or patient or organized or healthy as we'd like to be. So just like Gina and me, still in our old house months after we thought we'd be citizens of a new town, here we all are—still ourselves, and our process of *teshuvah*—of turning onto a new path--still far from complete.

But Gina and I know that at some point we will be moving. And so it is with this work of the High Holydays. Even if the ultimate goal is unattained, we're still in the process. Which is why we engage in it every year, coming back together, making new commitments, setting new intentions, trying again. Which brings me to:

#2: The importance of intention

Gina and I did not start our moving process in the most organized way. We had been talking about leaving Lexington after Zoe graduated high school, and one day last March we invited a realtor who had helped us 10 years ago to come over and take a look at our house,

and the next thing we knew we were shlepping to Watertown and Waltham and looking at new places and talking about putting our house up for sale. It took a couple of weeks before we realized that it had all happened too fast, and that we hadn't taken the time to think through how we wanted to go about this. So we took a deep breath, stepped back, and tried to gently let that realtor know that things weren't going exactly the way we'd intended.

The beauty of the High Holydays season is that it really gives us time to think about where we've been this past year, and where we'd like to go in this coming year. The process traditionally begins back in the beginning of Elul, a month ago, when we begin to blow the shofar every morning, waking us up to the possibility of change. We're invited to take stock of our lives, to do a kind of "soul accounting," *cheshbon hanefesh*. Where have we done well, and where can we use a little encouragement to do better? What questions loom that need exploration? What have we been pushing to the corner of our minds, trying to ignore, when we know it needs attention?

Sometimes all that we really need to do to start a *teshuvah* process is to simply set an intention – to make known to ourselves, and perhaps others – that there is something we want to change, to do differently in the year to come. We might have no idea how that is actually going to happen, but that's okay. The first step is simply acknowledging it, and making a commitment to proceed. This can sometimes make an intractable problem feel less overwhelming: we don't need to solve it right away, just set the intention to seek some solution.

This is why Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher, said that the first step in *teshuvah* is verbal confession. There is something powerful about the act of saying aloud—whether to ourselves, to God, to other people—what needs to be said. In linguistic terms, this is "performative speech," an act of speaking which has the power to change our reality. We will have many opportunities during services over this next ten days for this kind of speech, whether the words are found in the prayerbook, or are from our own hearts. I encourage all of us to think about one intention that we'd like to set for this coming year, and to say it aloud at some point this week—to ourselves, to the Universe, to someone you trust. Say it, and know that by doing so, the process has begun.

#3: Knowing when it's time to make a change

After our initial false start, it took us a couple of tries before we settled on a real estate broker whom we felt comfortable with to sell our house. But before we found him, we endured a very unpleasant time with someone who just wasn't a good match. After every showing, this realtor would tell us all the negative things people had said about our house, and we were slowly getting more and more depressed about it. After about 4 weeks, we decided this wasn't working, and we asked if we could end the contract early. After initially saying "yes," the realtor turned around the next day and told us that no, she wouldn't let us out of the contract, that she was doing a good job, and that if we wanted to sell our house we had to entirely redo our kitchen. To say the least, we were a tad surprised. This kicked

off a very difficult week that culminated in what we had wanted in the first place - to just be done with this particular professional relationship.

In retrospect, both Gina and I realized that before we got up the nerve to ask out, we were really miserable. We had thought our unhappiness was part of the process, and it took getting really unhappy before we had the guts to make a change.

What I learned from this is that there is a difference between the challenges that accompany real change, and misery. Misery is not good, and doesn't usually lead to much, except more misery. It takes real discernment to know when the par-for-the-course unpleasantness that attends any attempt to make lasting change in our lives has descended into unnecessary pain and struggle.

Sometimes, misery is a signal that we need to make a change. And with that realization, discernment is called for in understanding what needs to change, and what needs to happen next. Sometimes in our misery we act rashly, we're confused, we don't fully understand the root of our suffering and so we go off in the wrong direction. We can end up hurting others, and ourselves, if we go too far off course. So we need to listen to our misery, and not be overwhelmed by it, but look a little deeper, and see what's really going on.

Gina and I didn't need a new kitchen, because the kitchen--however much work it might need—is not why the house wasn't selling. In that moment, what we needed was a new realtor. Which brings me to:

#4: When you set out to make real change, the universe will send angels to help you along.

While we've had a few unlucky encounters with some people in this house-buying-and-selling process, we've had far more wonderful moments with people that Gina and I have taken to calling our "angels." They include our current realtor, who helped us buy our new house in Waltham, and who loves our Lexington house even though it's not selling; the lovely contractor who did an incredible job fixing our dining room when we realized the ceiling was about to fall in; our very own Steve Siegel, who shlepped out to Lexington to inform us that our dining room ceiling was, in fact, about to fall in; the electrician who came and did some work for us and then came again because I'd forgotten something and didn't charge us the second time; the hilarious man at Watertown Savings Bank who helped us secure our bridge loan; the realtor referred by friends who graciously got us out of our toxic realtor relationship. These people, and more, have been our angels.

In the Torah, the word usually translated as "angel" is *malakh*, which translates more literally as "messenger." These *malakhim*, messengers, most often take a very mundane form, usually appearing as people. We, the readers, are informed that this person is a *malakh Adonai*, a messenger of God, but the character in the story who encounters the *malakh* initially just sees a person, and only afterwards realizes that this is in fact a "messenger of God."

So while the word "angel" conjures up an otherworldly being that has wings, and maybe a halo, I like the Torah's idea of a "messenger": a mundane someone who comes across our path who has a gift for us in that moment--an instruction, or a little bit of help; perhaps a kind word just when we need it. A *malakh* can be someone we encounter once and never see again, or someone who becomes part of our life. But it's up to us to recognize that this is indeed a *malakh*, a messenger who shows up in that moment to give us something we need.

Recognizing when we've had a *malakh* encounter can be very helpful, especially at difficult and challenging times. These encounters can make us feel less alone. They help us realize that the universe really is on our side, is rooting us on, and is sending cheerleaders to help us along.

Sometimes a *malakh* brings a necessary but difficult message, a message we might reject if we're not aware that we're being addressed by a Godly messenger.

In tomorrow's Torah reading, we'll read about Hagar's second encounter with a *malakh*, a messenger who helps her see a well of water that she has failed to see; a well of water that will save her and her son's lives.

The first time she had an encounter with a *malakh Adonai*, before the birth of her son Ishmael, Hagar received a very mixed message. She was told that through her son, she would become the matriarch of a great nation, but first she had to go back to the camp of Avraham and Sarah, a place she had fled because her mistress had been abusing her. I imagine this was a very difficult message for Hagar to hear. "I like the part about the son and the twelve tribes that will descend from him," she might have told the messenger, "but couldn't we figure out a way for that to happen without me having to return to that woman who has it in for me?" But Hagar didn't say that; in fact, we're told that she realized she was having an encounter with something Godly and true, and she did as the messenger said. She understood in that moment that she would have to endure more trials, and ultimately be sent away from the father of her child, to realize her destiny.

Like Hagar, we are each invited to listen closely when the universe speaks to us, and to hopefully hear as best we can the messages being sent.

#5: To prepare a house for sale, get rid of two things in every room.

This was the advice our first ill-fated realtor told us - and even though we didn't end up working with her, it was good advice. We've done a remarkable amount of clearing out in order to market our house--taking out bookshelves and giving away most of the books on them; getting rid of some furniture, clearing out closets. When we finally move, we'll have even more to get rid of, since we're moving to a significantly smaller new place, but we've made a good start.

The process of *teshuvah* entails a similar sort of clearing out. It involves letting go of things that we no longer need, even though they're very familiar. Old patterns, defensive habits,

ways of thinking or acting that perhaps played some useful role in our lives once upon a time, but are now just cluttering up our internal space. This is also a process of discernment: trying to see clearly what's old, what is in the way, what is no longer serving us. I still have on my shelves feminist theory books from the early 1980s; books that were cutting edge when I was in college but at this point are doing nothing but taking up space.

Over these Yamim Noraim, these next ten days, I invite you to take some time to check your own internal “rooms,” and imagine yourself removing a couple of things from each one. What might you be ready to let go of? What ingrained habit might no longer be serving you? What view that once felt so essential to your identity might be relinquished? What habitual patterns in your mind, those obsessive places we return to again and again, can just be let go? You can use the Tashlikh ceremony tomorrow afternoon to effect this letting go – really imagine yourself releasing whatever it is that you no longer need, that has become an obstacle, into the water.

#6: Trust the process

After making a few offers on places that weren't accepted, Gina and I found a townhouse in Waltham that seemed to be just what we'd been looking for. It's in a more urban neighborhood than where we live now, walk-able to lots of things. The house itself is lovely, and the size we wanted. There's a deck out back, and a great new kitchen. And the price was right. We made an offer, went back and forth a few times, and soon found ourselves in the process of purchasing our new home.

In the meantime, we put our Lexington house on the market, and anticipated finding a buyer well before our June closing date. One month passed, and no offers. We changed realtors, fixed the dining room (it's quite lovely now!), lowered the price, and tried again. Still nothing.

Now we were starting to get nervous. We couldn't pay for the new house unless we sold our current home, or we'd need to get a bridge loan. Had we made a mistake, plunging ahead and putting a down payment on the new place, without testing the market for our current house? Should we back out, and cut our losses before we ended up owning two homes? What had we done??

We decided to move ahead, to trust our feelings about the new place and have faith that things would figure themselves out. We got the bridge loan and figured out that if we rented our new place, we could cover our costs while we continue to try to sell. And everyone we've brought to see our new place has reinforced our sense that we did the right thing. And whenever we go by, we know that too.

Sometimes making *teshuvah* entails a leap of faith. Fear of the unknown can keep us from making needed change, even when our currently reality is making us unhappy. If people around us are reinforcing our sense that we need to head in a new direction, if our gut is telling us the same thing—then we trust. We trust that the universe will help things unfold

in the direction they need to go, even if we can't see the outcome right now. And I believe that the universe has its ways of telling us when we're moving in the right direction.

There are those messengers, telling us—if we listen—what we need to hear. There are our own hearts, which signal us if we're on a positive, wholesome path, or merely being reactive and hiding from our problems in a new way. Again, discernment is called for, but discernment is not the same as having all the answers. Sometimes we have to take a step without knowing the ultimate outcome, just knowing that in this moment, this is the step to take.

And finally:

#7: Gratitude

I am very aware that being the owner of not one, but two lovely homes, bridge loan notwithstanding, is an extremely privileged place to be in. When so many people in this country are losing their homes, when so many millions of people around the globe have no place to call home at all, I am overwhelmed with how incredibly lucky my family and I are. It is truly humbling.

I am equally grateful and humbled by the privilege of having this time and space to engage in the spiritual work of *teshuvah*. Every person needs a home, a safe place of shelter. And every human being deserves the opportunity to become the most whole person she or he can become, to cultivate qualities of generosity and compassion, of strength and wisdom.

As a Jewish community, we are privileged to have this gift of the Yamim Noraim, this structured time to engage in this work. We are supported by the rituals and traditions that have developed over the past few millennia, and we are supported by one another, a community coming together on this journey.

Tonight begins the month of Tishrei, and the Jewish year 5773. In two weeks, at the full moon of Tishrei, we will begin the holiday of Sukkot, *zman simchateynu*, the time of our joy. During Sukkot we are instructed to live for a week in a new home, the sukkah. It's a temporary home, a vulnerable home, a new and open home for what we hope are new and open spirits, nourished during these weeks of the High Holydays. My prayer for all of us is that whether we rent or own, whatever neighborhood we live in, that we make lovely new homes for our souls this year, spacious and filled with light. May these soul homes be filled with love and joy, with new challenges and just the right amount of furniture.