

Seven Things I Learned About *Teshuvah* from Riding a Bike

When Gina and I moved from Lexington to our current home in Waltham a couple of years ago, I discovered I now lived only a mile and a half from my office, and our CDT sanctuary, in West Newton square. The first thing that dawned on me was that I could walk to Shabbat morning services, which I have since done, albeit not as often as I'd like. I also realized that, in theory, I could now bike to work.

I say "in theory," because before we moved, the bicycle that I owned, one that I'd gotten when we'd divvied up my father's belongings after his death a decade ago - that bicycle was not in any shape to be ridden. It had been mistakenly left out in the rain and snow for months; I had also managed to puncture one of the tires when trying to inflate it. While I had vague notions of getting it fixed, so far I hadn't done much about it. So when we moved I hadn't biked in years, and I had no bike to ride.

That latter problem was solved about a year ago when Gina and I found ourselves the recipients of a lovely gift: two basic bikes - not fancy, not intimidating, with just a few gears - and helmets too, all ready to go. So now I had no more excuses! I could in fact bike to work, or take a ride on the lovely path that runs along the Charles River, just a few blocks from our new home.

So, as I've re-learned riding a bike and have tried to make it a little bit more of a part of my life, I wanted to share with you tonight seven things I've learned about teshuvah from riding a bicycle.

Lesson #1: Just get on the darn thing.

While I don't really mind riding a bike along a nice open bike path through the woods, I am terrified of biking anywhere near automobiles. And even though the route from my home in Waltham to the Second Church in Newton is not particularly choked with traffic, it's still a bit daunting to me. So part of starting to ride a bike has meant overcoming my own resistance to the whole idea. It's unfamiliar, I'm not very good at it, and the truth is I'm sort of terrified at the entire prospect. To get over this, I just had to get on the darn thing and ride.

As we enter into a new year and begin contemplating the ways in which we want to make changes in our lives, we can have the same sort of resistance. It's exceedingly hard to start new things, especially if we've gotten comfortable doing things the same old way (even if that same old way is not particularly satisfying or productive any more). Sometimes the very thought of change is terrifying, and we can let it build up in our minds to a point that even contemplating a shift is paralyzing.

When we're in a situation like that, sometimes the best thing to do is just to do something. Make the phone call that's frightening; throw out the old stuff you don't need anymore; get up the guts to take the first step away from a situation that has become toxic. Taking that

first step is often the most important part of the process of *teshuvah*--of turning onto the path that is most wholesome, most satisfying, most healthy, most needed.

Riding a bike is sort of terrifying, and so is being alive. It's okay if we're a bit afraid, as long as that doesn't stop us from taking the step that we need to take.

Lesson #2: Forward motion is a process of constant course corrections.

Riding down the path by the river the other day, I noticed how many little course corrections I was making all the time. Avoiding other people, getting around obstacles, going into and out of turns. While it's very enjoyable just to cruise along, there is also a constant level of awareness and paying attention called for if I want to stay upright.

"Constant course correction" is a nice definition of the word "*teshuvah*." *Teshuvah* comes from the Hebrew root *shuv* - to turn. When it's used in rabbinic texts, it has the sense of turning towards God, towards a Godly path. It's often translated as "repentance," with the connotation of turning away from sin, away from that which is destructive, and towards the good. It can also mean "return," which suggests that we are not heading somewhere new, but back to a better place--back to our best selves, our true nature.

Whether or not we need to repent of actual damage we have done, the notion that we need to engage in *teshuvah* as we head into the new year is a powerful one. This is the reason that this time of year, from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, is called *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*. It suggests a process of turning and returning as we navigate our lives, a constant negotiation of obstacles and potential hazards. It is a process of constant discernment: What does this moment ask of me? And the next moment? Because what is called for in this moment, in this situation, may not be what is called for as the situation develops and changes. I may need to make change in decisive way, or I may need to be gentle and careful as I strike out for something new. Am I hurting others as I make a change? Am I hurting myself? Will this action ultimately lead to healing, or to further harm? How can I do what needs to be done with integrity, with honesty, with kindness, to myself and others? As we seek to align ourselves with all that is wholesome and helpful in the new year, may we have the wisdom and discernment to make all the necessary course corrections.

Lesson #3: It would be so easy to do this if other people weren't involved.

I'm happy and relaxed when I'm riding along with no one else in sight; it's when pedestrians or other bikes or cars come along that I start to get nervous. How much easier this whole bike riding thing would be if I were always alone on the road!

And of course, it can seem that way in life as well. Our families, our work places, our communities--they all tend to have other people in them, and it can often seem that it's those other people who are making life so difficult.

The *teshuvah* lesson here is how easy it is to see others as the problem, when it might be more productive to turn my attention to myself. This is not to say that there aren't actual difficult people who can make us miserable; but even so, it's worth reflecting on how much we tend to blame others for our struggles, and how willing we are to take a good look at ourselves.

There is a wonderful teaching from the Baal Shem Tov, also known as the Besht, the founder of Hasidism. The BeshT teaches that when we see someone doing something that really bothers us, we should consider that that person was put in our life at that moment to teach us something about ourselves. He gives the example, from his own life, of seeing someone desecrate Shabbat. Instead of rebuking that person for dishonoring the Sabbath, the Baal Shem Tov describes a process whereby he thought about what he might have done that was somehow similar to what this person was doing. So even though he himself would never violate the laws of Shabbat, he was able to think of another situation that was akin, in a metaphoric way, to that desecration, and to realize the wrong he had done, and then make amends.

This is an amazing *teshuvah* practice. When someone does something that bothers me, that angers or annoys me--instead of lashing out at them or dismissing them, I can step back and think about what behavior I engage in that in some way mirrors this. The challenging person then becomes a teacher, even if unwittingly. And instead of staying in a place of anger or frustration, I can take it as an opportunity to make a correction in my own life.

Lesson 4: I'm much more likely to fall over when I tighten up in fear.

As I've already noted, other folks coming towards me or alongside me when I'm on the bike path makes me very nervous. I tighten up, and it's in those moments I'm most likely to swerve unnecessarily or even fall over, even when everything is actually fine and there's no real danger.

When I think about trying to live my life in a way that honors the best in myself and in those around me, I realize that one of the challenges is staying in an expansive, un-constricted space. When I am afraid, when I am angry, when I am annoyed or stressed or overtired, I tighten up. It's that tightness that makes me vulnerable to saying the wrong thing or forgetting something important.

There is a beautiful line from Psalm 118 that we sing as part of the shofar service: *Min hametzar karati Yah - v'anani b'merchav Yah*. "From the narrow place I called out to Yah, and I was answered from the expansiveness of Yah." This verse describes being stuck in a place of constriction, of tightness, of fear and stress - and calling out for help to get out of that space. The antidote to our constriction comes from a place of expansiveness, a place of possibility. It is interesting that the name of God here, Yah, also sounds like a breath. *Yaaaahhhh*. In those moments of tightness, perhaps the best reminder is to simply stop, and breathe.

It is inevitable that we will have moments of constriction, and perhaps the best thing to do in those moments is to not do much at all. The *metzar*, the narrow place, is not a great place to make major life decisions; it's not even a place where we want to say too long. Silence, breath, taking a moment to have a little compassion on ourselves--these are all good responses to those moments of tightness. When I'm riding along and all of a sudden the path feels too narrow, I just need to tell myself not to make any sudden moves, to relax and continue along as steadily as possible.

Lesson #5: Sometimes falling over is inevitable.

Even with all my caution and lack of dare-devilness, when I'm riding my bike I sometimes swerve or stop too abruptly and fall over, usually in an attempt not to run into other people. When this happens, it's not particularly dangerous, but it can hurt.

This is inevitable, the bumps and bruises of forging a new path. I am not a very skilled bike rider, although the more I do it the more confidence I have and the smoother the ride. As we move into a new year and make some attempts to change old habits, it's pretty likely that we'll make mistakes, that we'll bruise ourselves along the way. Having some compassion for ourselves as we figure things out is really essential. If we waited to make change until we were sure we'd make no mistakes, we'd never make a move at all.

While I sometimes over-compensate when I'm afraid I'm going to run into someone, overall I think it's the right intention - better that I should hurt myself a little bit than bang into someone else. Ultimately, I hope to become skillful enough to avoid injury all around. But in the meantime, as I feel my way, at least I can avoid hurting others.

Lesson 6: There's something marvelous about the view when I'm riding on a bike, different both from walking and from driving. It's different from driving because I'm close up, I can actually see where I am, I can feel the air on my face and get a sense of the neighborhood or the path I'm on. And it's different from walking - when I'm cruising around on my bike, I have a greater sense of the whole, it's much more expansive.

Coming into a new year can bring with it the opportunity to change our view. Much of spiritual practice is about that--shifting our view - of ourselves, and of the world. We can practice in order to foster gratitude. Viewing the world through the lens of gratitude can radically shift how we see ourselves and others. We can practice in order to foster patience, which also holds the potential to dramatically alter our experience of the world. Whether it's a practice of blessing, or of mindfulness meditation, or creating a gratitude journal, or eating in a wholesome way, or refraining from negative speech--taking on or recommitting to some kind of spiritual practice in the new year is a powerful way to open up new ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

And finally, Lesson #7: It's easier to do when others are doing it too.

Throughout the winter and spring I had a whole litany of excuses of why I was not yet biking to work: it was too cold; it was too hot; I needed my car during the course of the

day. It was when our Climate Change working group came up with the idea of a community Carbon Challenge that I vowed to myself to actually start biking to work. I haven't entirely kept up with my commitment--I haven't managed to do it every week. But at least I've made a start, and now have something to build on.

What I learned from this is the power of community when it's time to take on something new. It became even more meaningful for me to make the effort to bike to work knowing that I'd be contributing, even in a small way, to a larger collective effort. I have felt supported in my commitment, knowing that others in the congregation are taking on challenges as well.

And this is why we come together over these Ten Days of *Teshuvah*. We don't actually need a holiday to make changes in our lives; we don't need a prayerbook or a rabbi or any of this. Except that, we do. We need each other as we strive to become our best selves. We need this communal commitment--the support, the friendship, the basic presence of all these bodies and hearts and minds. Our own efforts are strengthened knowing that others--here in our community, and all around the Jewish world--are engaged in similar efforts. These days and all that they entail are a gift to us, just as those bikes were a gift to me and Gina--a gift of possibility and a gift of challenge. I look forward to these coming days with you, as we make our way to Yom Kippur, and then into the new year that stretches before us.

I'd like to end with a story about learning to ride a bike. I learned to first ride a bicycle when I was about 7 years old, from my father. I began with training wheels, and then one day it was time to take them off. So we took off the training wheels, and I got on the bike. I was ready to start riding, my father holding onto the back of my bicycle. He reassured me that he'd be holding on to make sure I didn't fall. So I started pedaling. "Dad, you there?" "Yep, I'm right here." I pedaled some more - "Dad, you there?" "Still here." After a minute, I realized his voice was a bit distant. I peered over my shoulder, and saw that he hadn't moved - I'd been pedaling on my own the entire time.

I think at that point I promptly fell over. I was mad that he had let me go, but of course I realize now - and I probably knew then - that that was the only way I was going to learn to ride.

That little episode teaches me something about faith. Even if my father wasn't actually holding onto my bike, the reality is he wouldn't have let me go if he hadn't thought I could do it. I hope, as we all move into these days of awe, these days of possibility and change, that we can have a little faith--in ourselves, and in that Something that holds us in love, that supports us as we make our way. Life is precarious, just like riding a bike. But we're not riding alone. May we have faith in all that has prepared us for this moment, for the love that supports us, for the support we give one another, and the space granted us to take the next step on our way.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu.

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