

## Seven Things I've Learned about Teshuvah From Household Appliances

There are many ways my life has changed in the two years since my spouse, Gina, passed away. I recently realized that this is the first time in my life that I have been the sole person responsible for the upkeep of a house. Until the year I turned 40, when I acquired my first mortgage with Gina, I had always lived in someone else's house – first my parents', then college dorms, and then many years as a renter. What this meant, in a practical way, was that I could leave the fixing of most house-related things to someone else.

When I met Gina, she had been single for about 5 years, and she owned her own home. Consequently, she had become pretty adept at household maintenance. Once we were living together, I was happy to continue letting her be in charge of that department (my job was keeping track of the bills to be paid). Now that she is gone, I am the one who has to deal with the things that break or need replacing.

My new attention to the various objects in my house—and the sheer number of things that have needed to be repaired over the past two years—inspired the topic of my talk tonight: “Seven Things I Have Learned about Teshuvah From Household Appliances.”

### **Lesson #1: Fix it before it explodes**

Beginning sometime last fall, I noticed a brown tinge in the water that was coming out of my bathtub faucet. It seemed worse some times more than others, and for awhile I thought that perhaps a storm surge had caused a temporary problem with the Waltham water supply. After a few months, despite my hope that just ignoring it would make it go away, I realized that there really was a problem. I called my condo-neighbors, who are in an attached unit, and asked them if this was happening to their water. They said no. I called the city, to see if there was a problem with the water supply; they said no. After procrastinating for months, I finally admitted that something seemed to be going on with my hot water heater, and I called the plumber.

When the plumber came, he told me the water heater was completely rusted out; it was a miracle it was still functioning. He put in a new one, and everything was fine again. Remembering when the water heater at our old house burst, flooding the basement, I became grateful for the rust, which had alerted me – despite my desire not to know – that there was a problem, before I had water everywhere.

It's really a gift that these *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the “Ten Days of Teshuvah,” come around every fall. They serve as a yearly opportunity to make a course correction in our lives. Like the rust in my water heater, the internal *shmutz* builds up. And sometimes we figure out creative ways to ignore the stuff that's accumulating, because it's easier to avoid it than

deal with it. But at some point, if we keep ignoring what's going on inside us, the whole thing will explode. If anger festers, if we hold a grudge, if we ignore the ways we are hurting ourselves or others, if we don't allow ourselves to fully grieve the losses in our lives—at some point, something will break down. Luckily, we have this yearly reminder that there's no reason to be like me, and just hope the problem will somehow miraculously go away. Each of us has an invitation to do some self-investigation as we enter into the new year, to see what might need some attending to.

Which brings me to:

## **Lesson #2: The Shmutz is Part of the Process**

I was never a fan of dishwashers. While we had one growing up, my parents only seemed to use it when they had parties. I grew up doing the dishes, and I firmly believed that our kids should have that character-building experience as well. Plus, I was convinced that dishwashers wasted energy and water. Gina disagreed with my dishwasher disapproval, as did my father, who slipped me a check one year after Passover, when he and my mom had ended up doing all the dishes after the seder, and pleaded with me to buy a new dishwasher. So I did a little research. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that dishwashers are only a waste of water if you wash all the dishes before you put them in. If you just scrape off the food, maybe give a little spritz, and then put the dishes in, it actually uses less water than washing by hand. And even more - I was told that the whole process needs some food on the plates to actually work and get them clean. Knowing all this, I relented, and became a dishwasher-using person.

From the dishwasher I learn that whatever mess I've accumulated over the past year is an integral part of coming out cleaner on the other side. It's okay that we get shmutzed up – that's the nature of living a life. It's impossible to learn without making mistakes. It's impossible to have relationships without sometimes getting hurt or hurting others. And then, every year, we're offered this opportunity to put ourselves through the clean and rinse cycle.

We can trust that our imperfect selves, crusted with whatever human error we've accumulated, can emerge a bit more whole, a bit less crusty, on the other end. In fact, it's better if we come in to the process with some old detritus still clinging to us. Our mistakes, our hurts, our failings, are all opportunities to learn. I read recently that the singer Rihanna has a tattoo that says "Never a failure, always a lesson." What a wonderful teaching for these Days of Turning. Can we take what feel like failures and make them into lessons, and be open to learning to do better in the year to come?

**Lesson #3** actually comes from a dear friend of mine named Cindy, who passed away a few years ago. Cindy had a great laugh, and she used to love to tell this story from the early

days of dating the man who would become her husband. Cindy didn't like to cook, but she decided, early in their relationship, that she would impress him by having him over for dinner. She found a recipe, and prepared a chicken to roast. She put it in the oven, set the timer, and got everything else ready for dinner.

When the timer went off, Cindy opened the oven, and discovered that the chicken was completely raw. Apparently, having never used the oven in her apartment before, Cindy didn't realize that the gas was not turned on. She ended up taking her new boyfriend out to dinner.

The lesson here is—the oven only works if the gas is turned on.

Our tradition gives us a wonderful structure in which to do the work of *teshuvah*. Beginning tonight, and continuing through Yom Kippur, we have times set aside for prayer and reflection during which we can think about our lives and make new commitments. We have lots of words to help us – the words of the *machzor*, the prayerbook; words of poetry; words that I and others will share. And we have the support of community, the awareness that we're not doing this alone.

But if we don't bring a sincere intention to examine ourselves, to make the effort to understand where we've been and where we want to go, to really open ourselves to this whole process, then it's like trying to cook a chicken with the gas turned off. Just walking in the door won't do it. There's nothing magic about coming to services, or fasting on Yom Kippur, or doing any of this. The rituals are a vehicle to hold us as we take a closer look at ourselves, as we make an honest attempt to see the whole, beautiful, flawed reality that is me, that is you, and to think about what might be different in the year to come.

Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi famously taught that because Jewish prayers are in books, we mistakenly think that *davvening*—praying—is reading. But it's not. It's much more active than that. We need to actively engage with the words on the page, moving our lips, opening our mouths and our hearts. Or if the words on the page don't do it for you, then sitting quietly and letting the words and music wash over you, and noticing what arises in your heart and mind, can be a powerful experience. Even if you're not entirely sure what you're doing, just having the willingness to engage with sincere intention can bring results. With the gas turned on, we have the opportunity to nourish ourselves, to do a little cooking for the new year.

The topic of kitchen appliances brings me to—

#### **Lesson #4: The Refrigerator**

Sometime this past winter, my refrigerator stopped working. I noticed one day that it wasn't as cold as usual, and I changed the temperature setting. But the next day it wasn't

any better, and then it seemed to stop working entirely. I called a repair shop, and a lovely repairman showed up that day to fix it.

As he explored what was wrong, he showed me that in the freezer there's an element that distributes the cold air throughout the fridge. That element was completely covered in frost, not allowing the air to flow. When the repairman removed the cover to clean it off, I saw that behind it was actually a heating element, and that was what was broken. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the cold in my refrigerator depends on this heater to work.

Like the inner workings of my fridge, there is something about this *teshuvah* process that involves contradiction and paradox. "*Teshuvah*" literally means "turning" or "returning"—suggesting that it is not a linear process. *Teshuvah* involves course corrections, zig-zags, turning here to get over there. In my own process of learning and growing over the years, I've come to realize the importance of being able to sit with apparent contradiction. I need to be comfortable with things not proceeding in what might be considered a straight line.

To love fully, sometimes I need to set boundaries. To access joy, sometimes I need to sit with sadness. To come to a deeper understanding of myself, I need to let in the views and perspectives of those who are different than me. *Teshuvah* can be a wonderful process of embracing disparate elements of ourselves, and of looking for insights outside of our usual experience, to enlighten us. Or it might mean trying something completely counter-intuitive to figure out what's going on. To fix the cold, find the heat.

#### **Lesson #5:**

I am one of those people who still has all of my vinyl records, which I began accumulating in the early 1970s. I have schlepped them with me from place to place since college, and they now reside on the second floor of my house. When Gina and I moved from Lexington five years ago, I gave away my old speakers, which were too big for the new house, and so until about a month ago my stereo and the records were sitting, unused, on my second floor. I had this idea of hooking up a system throughout the house whereby I could play the records on the second floor – which is the only place where I have the room for all of them—but hear it downstairs. What seemed to make the most sense was a wireless set-up, with Bluetooth speakers on the first floor.

As I began looking into getting a new wireless receiver and speakers, I read an article that talked about how newer sound systems give so much attention to all the bells and whistles associated with playing streaming music that the actual sound quality has become a low priority. So-called "vintage" stereo systems—like the one I have that my father bought some time in the 1980s—are apparently much higher quality, especially for those of us who like the sound of our analog records.

After getting used to the idea that my teenage years are now considered “vintage,” I stumbled upon some old Bose speakers selling for \$50 at a consignment store. I brought them home, purchased some good old-fashioned speaker wire, and I can now happily listen to my records the way they were meant to be listened to (although I still have to figure out the downstairs part).

My stereo system has taught me that there is irreplaceable value in old stuff. Part of what draws so many people to High Holydays services, even if going to services is not part of our usual routine, is the draw of ancient rituals and ancient wisdom. Like the people who built sound equipment forty years ago, our Biblical and rabbinic ancestors knew what they were doing when they crafted these holy days. While our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur practice today is different in many ways from what Jews were doing a millennia or two ago, there resides within these Ten Days of Teshuvah a time-tested, well-built structure to support an eternal human need for forgiveness and transformation.

The notion of *teshuvah* as “return” suggests that sometimes the way forward begins by going back. Traditionally speaking, our aim during these days is to “return” to God. This implies that at some point we were close to God, and that is a place we are trying to get back to. To me this means that *teshuvah* is not necessarily about heading out into unknown territory, but trying to recapture a spiritual wholeness that somewhere, deep within us, we already have.

We can also think of *teshuvah* as a “return” to our truest selves. We are invited to remember what our actual priorities are, our deepest values, our foundational commitments. Like the allure of cutting-edge stereo systems with all the bells and whistles, it’s easy to get caught up in shiny new things that promise something we’ve never had before. Sometimes we think we can solve old problems by acquiring something new—a new job, a new relationship, a new place to live. And while there are times when changing some of the external circumstances of our lives is wise and necessary, it’s also possible that when we’re feeling like we’ve gotten off track, or are feeling stuck, what we actually need is to go back, to some aspect of ourselves that has gotten left behind.

What is that “vintage” part of me that needs some attention, some nurturing, some love and care? What wisdom do I already have that I just need to remember? Like the records that have accompanied me throughout my adult life, each of has within us some precious knowledge, some deep sense of what is right and what is wrong, that is there for us to return to, whenever we need it.

**Lesson #6:** There is a problem with my garage door. About five months ago it stopped working. I pulled into my driveway and I clicked the door-opener, and nothing happened. I went inside and tried the button inside the garage, but that didn’t work either. So I went on-line to find a repair service, and two guys came out later that day.

The guys were in there for a few hours, and when they left, the garage door was working. It worked for about 6 weeks, and then it stopped again. I tried to call the place that had done the work, but it seemed to have mysteriously closed down, or something. I don't really know who those guys were, and I have no idea at this point if they actually fixed anything or not. In the meantime, I figured out that something in the mechanism gets off track, and if I fiddle with the door, I can get it working again for awhile, until it stops, and I have to fiddle with it again.

So while I still need to have someone reputable come and fix my garage door (and I now have a referral from the wonderful CDT listserv!), the lesson of my garage door is that sometimes we think we've taken care of something, but it's still out of whack.

In the realm of *teshuvah*, this means that we need to notice when, despite our good intentions and best efforts, something we thought we had attended to has once again gotten off track. Sometimes we're lucky, and an area of our lives that needs adjusting stays adjusted. But more often than not our spiritual work, our relationships, our attempt to become better people, are an ongoing process. What serves us at one point in our lives needs some upgrading when we go into the next phase. A bad habit that we thought we had left behind shows up again at a time of stress. A relationship that seemed to be going along fine starts to show signs of strain, and demands some extra attention and care.

It can feel discouraging to have to engage with an aspect of our lives that we thought was all good. Cultivating wholesome qualities like patience, or gratitude, or generosity or joy, can be lifelong pursuits. The ability to forgive ourselves, or forgive others, doesn't just happen once and for all. But while I didn't do a very good job at getting my garage door fixed the first time, I am confident that the next time around I'll be more successful in getting it repaired. Until something happens and I have to attend to it once again.

### **Which brings me to Lesson #7: We don't have to do this alone.**

With the exception of the dubious garage door guys, in general I am deeply appreciative of repair people who show up at my house when I have a problem. I love their attention to their craft, and their willingness to share a little bit of their knowledge with me if I ask. I love that a problem I had is actually fixed after they come by. I really appreciate that they don't treat me like a complete idiot even when it's obvious that I should have called them a whole lot sooner.

And while we can't just call in a repair person to do our work of *teshuvah* for us, the reality is that we are not doing this alone. These High Holydays services are at one and the same time intensely personal and entirely communal. The collected energy of our voices when we sing, the power of all of our good intentions, the beautiful silences we create, the discussions we have—all of these communal efforts support our individual journeys of

transformation and renewal. Whether you know most of the people in this room or know barely anyone, it doesn't really matter. For the duration of these holidays, we are a community of practice. And our practice is *teshuvah*. We aren't trying to fix each other, and to be honest we aren't even really trying to fix ourselves. We come together to remind ourselves of what is holy and good in each of us. We come together to access the compassion that lives in our hearts, if we can just open ourselves to it. By coming together we reinforce the possibility of change and the potential for renewal.

My wish for all of us, as we enter into 5779, is that we find the support we need for our turnings and returnings; that the Source of Compassion in the Universe is accessible to each of us, and that the new year brings new opportunities for learning, for repair, for insight and joy.

*L'shanah tovah tikateivu*, may we all be written for a good new year.

*Rabbi Toba Spitzer*  
*Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779*