

Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5771
Rabbi Fine

Before speaking today, I want to let you know that we're going to try something a bit experimental today.

As an educator, I'm a big believer in using different modalities for learning, not just lecture, and we're going to try out a more participatory component today.

I'm going to speak first, and then we're going to take about 10 minutes to do a reflective exercise with a partner.

I hope having this participatory component will help us begin to engage more deeply in the process of change that this high holiday season is all about.

Yesterday I spoke of an inward journey of deep introspection as the first step in our process of *teshuva*, our spiritual work of the high holidays.

I spoke of shedding ideas about our self that limit who we are by seeing who we really are today, in order to make space for being someone new.

As important as that is, it is only part of the process of *teshuva*. Ultimately, we take the inward journey in order to fulfill the second stage of *teshuva*, an outward journey, a journey of going back out into the world to live in a better way.

Our own Robin Dale asked me at some point this summer as our Sinai garden was in full swing, are you going to use the metaphor of the Sinai vegetable garden on the high holidays?

Because it's such a good metaphor for life. I said, 'I just might Robin, not a bad idea'.

So here it goes. Our first step has been to clear the ground where we are going to plant our garden.

We need to pull up the old dead plants from last years growing season and throw them in the compost pile to eventually enrich a new growing season.

Through our process of introspection, we pull up any weeds that have taken over our plot. We turn over the groundcover that was keeping our soil occupied.

Through examining our lives closely, we till the soil of our inner life, fertilizing it and preparing it for planting.

That's as far as the process I described yesterday took us. We begin by preparing ourselves for the possibility of new growth.

But then what? How do we figure out what next steps to take to grow into the healthy and holy human beings that we strive to be in the year ahead?

The great Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piazetzna, also known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, said that on Rosh Hashanah, "We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone."

In Michelangelo's words, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it."

Rosh Hashanah is the time we step back from our sacred block of stone, look upon what we have carved out thus far, and rediscover the hidden sculpture of our lives that is yet to be fully made.

Once we have done this though, the question that follows, is how do we become the person we are meant to be, the person that still lies in potential, waiting for the artist to transform it from a vision to a reality?

Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel teaches that each of us is a Divine art piece.

Rabbi Arthur Green, Heschel's student who spoke here at Temple Sinai earlier this year, recalled a statement by his teacher. Heschel was once asked, "why are graven images forbidden by the Torah?"

You might think, along with the medieval Jewish philosophers, that it is because God has no image, and any image of God is therefore a distortion. But Heschel had a different answer.

"No," he said, "it is precisely because God has an image that idols are forbidden. You are the image of God. But the only medium in which you can shape that image is that of your entire life. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God's image out of it – that diminishes the divine and is considered idolatry."

In Green's words, "you can't make God's image, you can only be God's image."

Spiritual awakening is not about becoming something other than who we are, it is about remembering and becoming what we already are deep down.

There are two words used in the Torah to refer to humans as made in the image of God, *tzelem* and *dmut*.

On the one hand, our tradition asserts that every person is made in the image of God from the moment we are born – *b'tzelem Elohim*.

The mystics say it another way, that we each have a spark of God in us, or our soul. This definition of the human asserts that every human being has inherent worth.

The second word in the Torah used to describe how we are made in the image of God is *dmut*, which might be best translated as “likeness.” This term means something a little different than *tzelem*.

If *tzelem* refers to our purest self that is there deep down no matter what, the statue hidden in the stone, or the seed in the soil that is yet to sprout, *demut* refers to the image of God we grow into when we make that best self real in the world, becoming more like God.

We all have infinite and unique potential, but we need to transform that potential into reality by the way we live.

So how do we do this?

Once we have achieved greater clarity and perspective on the state of the sacred art project of our lives, how do we undertake the work of reshaping ourselves in the image of God?

What tools do we have to use as sacred artists to shape our lives?

How can we close the gap between who we are now, and who are meant to be?

The answer according to our tradition is clear. We are blessed with the *mitzvot*, the commandments.

What transforms our potential into actuality is sacred action – action that manifests the person we have the potential to be. Our actions are the tools we have to sculpt our lives with, to truly change who we are in the world.

As we know, the *mitzvot* are central to our prayers on the high holidays. We ask God for forgiveness for actions we did or didn't take, and we commit ourselves to striving to act in righteous ways in the world in the year ahead.

But the mitzvot are about much more than doing what God somewhere on high commands us to do, just because He said so.

The early rabbi's gave a powerful explanation of the *mitzvot* by asking a provocative question about the laws of kosher slaughter of an animal.

In a striking Midrash, the question is asked:

'What does the Holy Blessed One care whether one does ritual slaughter of an animal and then eats it, or pierces it and eats it?'

In other words, this early rabbinic source is asking, does God really care about us doing all of those intricate details of kashrut? I'm sure some of you have asked this very question thousands of years later.

The Midrash answers:

'Behold, the mitzvot were not given except in order to refine people through them.' -- "*l'tzaref et habriyot.*"

In other words, God doesn't care if you do the mitzvah just because God said to do it -- God cares if you do the mitzvah because God wants you to change your life!

The mitzvot are what we Jews have been given to help us do that.

They are here to refine us, to change us, to help us become the people we are meant to be.

The mitzvot aren't here to make us automatons, just following rules blindly. Just the opposite!

They're here to help us become the truly alive sensitive creatures we are at heart.

This is why we say to God in our prayers, *ahava raba ahavtanu* – **You have loved us with a great love...va'tilamdem chukei chayyim** – **you taught our ancestors and us life-giving laws.**

The giving of the *mitzvot* was an act of love on the part of God – because they are tools to help us refine and change ourselves and the world around us in positive ways.

Commenting on our midrash, the Piazehtzner Rebbe said: **“the essence of the mitzvot is to purify and cleanse, and to reveal *Ha'Yisrael Ha'Amiti* - the true self of the Jew.”**

HaYisrael ha'amiti. The true Israel within us. The *mitzvot* reveal the deepest holiest aspects of us that otherwise lay dormant in potential.

The Piazhetzner believed that each mitzvah has the power to reveal a particular aspect of that potential.

I'd like to share an example from my own life where I have seen this to be true.

This year as part of my job as rabbi, I have had the opportunity to do the mitzvot of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, and *nichum aveilim*, comforting mourners.

What I have found, is that these are two *mitzvot* that help make me be the caring, empathic person that I have the potential to be.

After I worked as a chaplain in a hospital a couple of summers ago I felt this profoundly. For a while, whenever I would get nervous about something, such as a job interview for example, I would tell myself to put on my “chaplain shoes”.

I wasn't thinking about a literal pair of shoes. I was reminding myself of the grounded feeling I had when as I was able to embody a deep aspect of myself through doing the mitzvah of caring for the sick.

In those moments, the caring aspect of my soul went from potential to actuality; it became a stronger feature in the sculpture of my life. I felt that my best self was physically standing in my shoes.

The thing that I have noticed this year is that doing these mitzvah has begun to help me be that person not just as a rabbi, but in my relationships with friends and family too.

For the Piazhetsner, to totally and fully achieve these mitzvah of visiting the sick and caring for mourners, would mean to fully actualize that compassionate aspect of myself.

I would in fact no longer need the mitzvah to help remind me what is the caring thing to do, because the essence of the mitzvah would be so fully alive within me.

Like most of us though, I am still working towards that goal.

But the Piazhetsner reassures us, that we shouldn't feel badly about only being only part way there.

He compares the full achievement of the essence of a mitzvah to reaching the top of a mountain.

In 1930 in Poland , he wrote the following:

“Every mitzvah is lofty, and it is impossible for a Jew that he will achieve it all at once. Rather, each time he tries to do the mitzvah

with purpose, he ascends closer to the mitzvah until he eventually arrives at it.”

This can be compared to a person who climbs a tall mountain – do we only say that he has gone up the mountain when he has reached the top? He goes up with each and every step that he takes, and even when he is still standing in the middle of the mountain, he has already gone up the mountain relative to all of the people that are on the land below.

It is as if he has already climbed a mountain, but now he has to go up further and climb a second mountain that is found above the one he has already climbed.

So it is with all of the efforts that a Jew puts towards a mitzvah, they are real deeds and ascensions, it’s only that the mitzvah it still yet higher. And so he prepares to climb further, again and again until he arrives at the mitzvah”.

While the full essence of a mitzvah is only achieved over a long period of time, each and every time we take a meaningful action, it is a real and significant step towards becoming the person we are meant to be, and towards making the world the place it is meant to be.

I’m sure we all know how hard it is to actually change something about yourself or how you live your life.

No matter how heartfelt our intentions, change doesn’t come easily. We all have our habits, that sometimes seem to have much more power than our intentions.

That is why to really change, we need to use the power of habit. *Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit."*

We need to determine the actions that are in line with who we really

want to be, and then do them over and over again until they simply become a natural expression of we truly are.

On this point, our sages agree with their Greek colleague.

Most mitzvot aren't acts that are meant to be done once or twice a year, but on a regular basis.

Every purposeful positive action, no matter how small, makes a real and important impact on us and on others that can eventually add up to something very significant.

We don't arrive at the top of the mountain by one giant leap, but one small step at a time, taken over and over again.

We are what we repeatedly do.

Doing the mitzvot though, is of course not only about changing ourselves, but about changing the world around us. It's not only about helping ourselves be who we are meant to be, but about helping others be who they are meant to be.

I've chosen to share the teachings of the Piashentzer Rebbe today not only because they have had a deep impact on me personally, but because I believe he is a guide we can trust. He was someone who lived the Torah that he taught.

Rabbi Shapira was known as the Piashetner Rebbe, because he was a Rebbe in the town of Piashetna outside of Warsaw, Poland in the first half of the 1900's.

He was also known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, because he became an incredibly important leader in the Warsaw ghetto under Nazi occupation.

Amidst the terrible reality of the Warsaw ghetto, the Piazheter acted with generosity, teaching and uplifting thousands of Jews during desperate times.

Those who met him had great veneration and love for him.

If there was one *mitzvah* that comes to mind when one thinks of the Piazheter Rebbe, it is *v'shinantem l'vanecha* – the mitzvah to teach our children.

I believe he achieved the essence of this mitzvah fully, becoming a *tzadik*, a truly righteous person as a result.

Before the second world war, and during it, the Piazheter Rebbe devoted his time to the children of Warsaw in particular.

He used to say, "My followers eat on Yom Kippur. You know why? They are not bar mitzvah yet."

It is told that if a great Rabbi would come to him, or an old man and a little girl of four or five, he would say to the older man, "You'll make it without me. This child needs me."

With older people he would spend five minutes; with children all day. Reb Shlomo Carlebach tells that he had thousands of kids. "He was their father, their mother, their best friend."

I had the opportunity to speak with my teacher Rabbi Nehemia Polen before Rosh Hashanah, who shared with me a powerful story that he heard from a man he met named Melech Cukier.

Very few of the Piazheter Rebbe's young students from his yeshiva, his school in Warsaw, survived the war.

Mr. Cukier was one such person. When Nehemia met him, he was

quiet well off, living in Bel Aire.

But as a child in the interwar period in Poland, he was dirt poor, along with so many of the Jews of that time and place.

A scholar once said that the interwar Jewish community in Europe was the most impoverished Jewish community anywhere in history.

Speaking of those years Mr. Cukier said, “We have no idea what poor means. It meant kids didn’t have shoes to wear, not only in the summer, but even in the winter.

Many children in the Piazhetzner’s yeshiva were on the edge of starvation. When the yeshiva was able to provide meals to the children through donations that the rabbi distributed, it could mean life or death for them.

Because the children in the yeshivot in Warsaw were so poor, they used to hire themselves out as night watchmen for merchants.

These merchants had small stall shops, little kiosks, on the streets of Warsaw.

The merchants weren’t rich themselves, and were worried about theft at night, so they would hire the children for some bread or a few pennies to sleep there for the night to watch over the shop.

Many children survived this way, heading back to the yeshiva in the morning.

But the terrible thing was that the merchants didn’t fully trust the kids either, so they would close the big metal grates of their kiosks, locking the kids in for the night without giving them the key.

They were fine most of the time, but it was a terrible danger if God forbid there was a fire or anything of the sort.

Melech Kukier was one of these children who became a night watchman just to survive during those years.

But he recalls, for children like himself in the Piazetner's yeshiva, the situation was different because of the care of the Rebbe.

The Piazheter personally went to each merchant where his students worked during the night, and told them "my kids get the key." He insisted they agree not to lock the child in.

While he was a great Hasidic Rebbe, the head of a large yeshiva, he would still personally go into the worst parts of Warsaw to make sure that his children were not put in a situation in which they were in risk and had no way out, either physically or emotionally.

The way that the Piazetna rebbe fulfilled the mitzvah of teaching children didn't just make him into the person he was meant to be, but it also reminded thousands of children that they too were made in the image of God at a time when the world had conspired against them to tell them they were worth nothing.

Our actions shape us, and they shape the world.

Unfortunately this goes for negative or careless actions as well.

For the Piazehtzner, the most important thing about actions was that they should be purposeful.

If we take actions without thinking about why we are doing them, we won't end up achieving what we are meant to achieve.

Little did Robin know, but 80 years ago in Poland, the Piazetner Rebbe also thought the metaphor of a garden was a good one.

He says the following about taking actions without purpose:

This can be compared to a gardener who is responsible to take various actions in his garden -- to plow and to plant, to weed and to water -- and the purpose of his actions is to bring forth a rose. If he does all of this and the rose doesn't grow, he hasn't done anything whatsoever. So too, the essential point of a mitzvah is to bring forth the true self of a Jew....

As we evaluate our actions this Rosh Hashanah, we have to ask ourselves, have they helped us grow the rose of our truest self?

In what turned out to be his final interview before he passed away, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, by his own request, shared some thoughts with young people.

Heschel was also a person whose actions spoke as much as his powerful words, and who recognized that the children are the future.

This was his message to them:

Above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You're not a machine.... Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.

We are not machines, Heschel reminds us -- something that is perhaps getting easier to forget as our lives become increasingly intertwined with computers and smart phones and i-pads.

Growing and changing as a human being is not a mechanical procedure, it is a creative and sometimes messy process that takes care and patience.

As we reflect on the year that has past; which actions have tended our garden, and which have been fruitless, or even destructive?

Which actions have simply watered the weeds in our lives, and which

have cultivated the seeds of our divine potential?

In order to give us a chance to delve into these questions more deeply, at this point, we are going to take about 10 minutes for a reflective exercise with a partner, after which I will gather us back together.

While I have just asked us to think about our actions in the past year, for the purposes of this exercise I am going to ask us to look forward instead.

This is your assignment. In a minute I want you to choose a partner sitting somewhere near you.

Please make sure no one is left out. If you need to walk a couple seats to find a partner that's fine.

For this exercise, I want everyone to choose one mitzvah that you would like to do more fully this year.

Your assignment is to choose one mitzvah that you feel will help you become the person you want to be this year.

One mitzvah that you feel can be an important tool for help making your best self real in the world.

It may be a mitzvah that you don't do at all now, or it may be a mitzvah that you do all the time, but that you could do more fully or in a different way.

At the back of the Rosh Hashanah supplement there is a list of *mitzvot* to choose from. You can choose your *mitzvah* from this list, or you can choose one that isn't on here.

Give yourselves a minute to read through the list with your partner, and to find which *mitzvah* you feel called to.

Then once you're both ready, one partner will share, answering the questions on the sheet for about 5 minutes. I'll let you know when 5 minutes have passed so the other person can then share.

When it's your partner's turn to speak, your job is to help him or her figure out answers to each question on the sheet, either just by being a good listener, or by asking follow up questions.

It's not so uncommon in shul on Rosh Hashanah for a rabbi to need to ask people to stop talking, but I'm glad to have the opportunity to say the opposite – start talking.

10 Minutes Conversation

Conclusion

I hope this conversation gave you a chance to dive into the reflective process of the high holidays more deeply.

Obviously these conversations are just the tip of an iceberg, and I invite you to continue them with your friends and family today and this weekend.

I want to end with the words of the writer Annie Dillard. She writes, "The way we spend our days is, of course, the way we spend our lives."

May we have the strength to spend our days narrowing the chasm between who we are and who God gave us the potential to be.

May we fill our days with actions that build our lives into the sacred masterpieces they are meant to be.

Shana tova.