

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME – STAGE ONE ON THE JOURNEY TO *TESHUVAH*

Rosh Hashanah 5778

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The question I want to address in my derashot, my sermons, today, tomorrow, at Kol Nidrei and the day of Yom Kippur is: how can we really change ourselves? Beginning today and then culminating on Yom Kippur, we are, all of us, undertaking a religious journey. This journey will take us, we fervently pray, away from the mistakes, habits and downright sins of our past selves, and toward the next year in which we aim to become, if not perfect, then at least a close approximation of our best selves. I believe that there are four stages to achieving true *teshuvah*, an authentic sense of repentance of past deeds and resolve to change our ways. The first is to intentionally cultivate a sense of **homelessness**, of estrangement from our familiar surroundings. The second is to open ourselves to feelings of vulnerability, to being unguarded and exposed to life's vagaries. The third stage is re-orientation, readjusting and realigning our most fundamental stance or position in the world, and the fourth and final stage is a deep understanding of the true meaning of transformation. I will devote each of my four sermons to

these stages, in order. We'll begin with homelessness, without intentionally casting ourselves into a form of exile.

I will not forget the sound of her voice. I was driving home from work in Los Angeles about ten years ago, and the radio on my car was tuned to “All Things Considered” on the local NPR station. The report that grabbed my attention started out as the typical “feel good story” that ATC does so well – in this case, a segment on Norooz, the Persian New Year. An ancient spring festival that pre-dates Judaism, Islam and Christianity, it is celebrated by Persians of all three religions, along with members of the Bahai faith and even Zoroastrians (yes, they still exist!). This particular story focused on a Persian Jewish family that had fled Iran after the Islamic Revolution. The family was clearly prosperous and thriving, upper-middle class immigrants who lived in one of the suburbs of Washington, D.C. A reporter interviewed various members of the family about how they celebrated Norooz; the atmosphere was festive as the Americanized children of immigrant parents, probably in their late teens and twenties, described the different foods eaten and symbols used to mark the holiday. You could hear the clinking of dishes and glasses in the background as they set the table, along with the faint sound of laughter. A classic North American narrative was being described to NPR’s listeners –

persecuted minority family flees oppression for the freedom and opportunity of the U.S. or Canada, while at the same time taking pride in the traditions of the culture it had left behind. It was the kind of multicultural, upbeat story that the producers of “All Things Considered” sometimes like to use to bring a half hour of the news show to a close.

And then the tone changed unexpectedly. The matriarch of the family, who I imagine was in her late fifties or early sixties and was integrated enough into American life to possess excellent English, with only a slight Farsi accent, described a particular recipe she liked to prepare for the holiday. She then paused for a moment and said, “but you know, celebrating Norooz here is not the same as it was in Tehran...” Her voice cracked a bit, and there was a long pause. In that pause you could almost feel the woman being overwhelmed by memories of a lifetime spent in a city half a world away, with its distinct smells, sounds, even the particular color of the sunsets. And then she began to weep uncontrollably. The joy of spending the holiday with her family in freedom was swept away under a tide of homesickness, of painful longing for what was left behind.

This radio story was broadcast well over ten years ago and probably lasted all of six minutes, and yet I remember the details as if they occurred yesterday. I think this is so because of the jarring, disconcerting feeling it

generated; a story intended to produce warm feelings instead ended in tears (the reporter visiting the family was audibly stunned by the woman's tearful outburst). But what was most striking was that this woman was an exile in an upper-middle class suburb! She was experiencing the pangs of homelessness in a prosperous, upscale town in Maryland. Now, I'm certain that she'd be the first to declare her gratitude to the United States for taking her and her family in, and for offering them freedom, safety, and economic opportunity. And yet to be an exile means to be forced to leave one's home, leave all that is familiar and comforting, for a new land not of one's choosing, in which the language, landscape, sights, sounds and smells are utterly foreign. Even if the new environment is welcoming and inviting, being uprooted from the world in which one was shaped can generate a sense of alienation, of estrangement in the literal sense, in which everything new seems strange and alien, the very ground beneath one's feet unsteady. While I can never know for certain, of course, I believe that the woman I heard that afternoon on the radio was suddenly confronted by precisely this feeling of being in exile.

I bring up my memory of her story because it, and others like it, have a direct bearing on how we experience the holiday we're marking today, and how we begin the path toward real change in our lives. In fact, a state of homelessness, of distance from our surroundings that is characteristic of exile,

is precisely the experience we're intended to undergo during the *asoret yemei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. If this journey of *teshuvah* is to have a real, transformative effect on us, on our outward behavior and inner spiritual life, our tradition insists that we must become estranged from ourselves. We must make an effort to, in effect, cast ourselves in exile, to become homeless. As outlandish as it may sound, that moment in the radio program in which the Persian Jewish woman was confronted with the distance between her original home and her present displacement, is **exactly** what we should be striving for if we want to transform those parts of ourselves that are most destructive and harmful and heal our relationships with others, with God, and even with ourselves.

The Talmud, in tractate Rosh Ha-Shanah, teaches:

“R. Yitzhak said: four things rip up the decree of a person (that is, four things can reverse God’s decree on our fate) – they are charity (*tzedakah*) prayer (*tza’akah* crying out), changing one’s name (*shinui ha-shem*), and changing one’s deeds (*shinui ha-ma’aseh*)...some say, changing a place (*shinui makom*), as it is written: “God said to Avram, go from your land...(and as a result), I will make you a great nation.” R. Yitzhak adds one little phrase to the verse in the Torah, the “as a result” or “it follows that” -- claiming that “because you, Avram, leave your land native land, as a result I, God, will make you a great

nation.” In the Talmud’s understanding, it is Avram’s willingness to remove himself from his makom, setting off on a journey to the unfamiliar, which is the reason for his being open to having a child at such an advanced age and becoming the father of a great nation. So *shinui makom*, changing places, carries with it the possibility of real change. Rambam (Maimonides) elaborates on the talmudic teaching of R. Yitzhak. Rambam writes: “Among the paths of repentance are...” and then list the same ones as R. Yitzhak. When he gets to the last one, instead of writing “changing one’s place/*shinui makom*,” Rambam insists one must “travel in exile from one’s home/*ve-goleh meem’komo*” continuing: “exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.” Rambam asserts here that making oneself homeless, putting oneself into exile, **itself** actually atones for transgression because of the psychological effect it has on us. Serious disorientation, a loss of all that is comforting and familiar, brings about a kind of humility that in turn opens us up to the possibility of radical transformation, of (in Rambam’s language) *teshuvah gemurah*, complete repentance.

Before getting into what this means, practically – how do we exile ourselves? – I want to emphasize that what it’s **not** – the Rambam isn’t talking about the first few weeks of a difficulty during a semester abroad to Europe

(new language, learning the map of a city, different food, even a little homesickness, etc.). It's also not the mythic romance of the youthful road trip, of leaving home to find adventure, in the spirit of Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" ...you know the lines: "How does it feel? To be without a home/Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone." No, when Rambam instructs one seeking teshuvah, self-transformation, to "travel in exile from one's home" I believe he has in mind something closer in spirit to what Shakespeare wrote four centuries later. Young Romeo is told by Friar Lawrence that he's been banished from the city of Verona. Romeo responds:

"Ha, banishment? Be merciful, say 'death,'
For exile hath more terror in his look,
Much more than death. Do not say 'banishment.'"

Friar Lawrence tries to comfort him by saying:

"Be patient, for the world is broad and wide."

Romeo will have none of it. He responds:

"There is no world without Verona walls
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence 'banished' is banished from the world,
And world's exile is death."

For Shakespeare, to be in exile is to be without the comforting familiarities of a particular world – it is a certain kind of death, not literal perhaps, but terrifying none the less.

Back to the question – practically, speaking, how do we exile ourselves? Does the Rambam’s teaching mean that we must literally move to another place in order to put ourselves through “purgatory, torture, hell itself” as a way of shaking ourselves out of our habits and past behaviors? I suspect that he meant it literally – if someone were truly mired in sin, unable to change, one possible solution, along with his others (changing name, one’s deeds, giving tzedakah, etc.) would be to move to another village or town. Needless to say, I’m not suggesting that for the religious journey of *teshuvah* to bring meaningful change, we need to sell our homes or give up our leases and head to Whitehorse, Moosejaw or Saskatoon (as romantic and frontier-like as those places sound to my American ears). No, there’s another path that while not as dramatic, may offer a more realistic opportunity for *shinui makom*, for changing our place. It comes from a giant of 20th century Jewish spiritual thought, Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook. In a radiantly beautiful reflection contained in his collection *Orot Ha-Kodesh/Sacred Illuminations*, Rav Kook presents a way of thinking about exile and homecoming that is centered on our inner landscape, our emotional and religious life. No need to start

packing...or better, not need to literally pack. But metaphorically -- that's another question, as you 'll see.

Kook begins with a text from the prophet Ezekiel: "I am amidst the Exile/ve-ani be-tokh ha-golah' [Ezek. 1:1], and gives it a radically innovative interpretation. "The I – the interior, essential self...can only be revealed in accordance with its purity and sanctity. "Instead of the literal meaning of the verse, that the Prophet is one of the Jews banished to Babylonia, Kook suggests that Ezekiel is describing an **inner** alienation, in which the self, the "I" suffers the condition of exile and seeks its way home. We don't need to put ourselves in exile, because we're already in exile from that part of ourselves that manifests God's Presence. Exile comes upon people because of our failings, our shortcomings. The first exile was Adam, who was expelled from the Garden of Eden. God asks Adam: *where are you?* But Adam can't answer...instead he hides. We've been hiding since then, claims Rav Kook, unable to respond as God had wanted: *I am here*. We can only be liberated from exile, from **inner** alienation, by sensing the sacredness of our deepest selves. The moment that we experience the Divine Breath within, we will be able to find our way home, to our true selves..For Rav Kook, our journey toward repentance is likened to the grand drama of Israel's history; cast into exile, the Jewish people sought to return their homeland. He transforms this narrative

into an internal drama of first being exiled from and then rediscovering God within the self.

There is a powerful lesson here for us. The good news is that Maimonides' notion that we travel far from our homes in order to shake ourselves out of our complacency and routine doesn't mean we literally need to move locations, humbling ourselves through "the terror of exile." But the bad news is that we exist in state of exile from our deepest selves and hence from God; if there is terror, it comes from *acknowledging* this, being awake to our distance from the sacred within. The first challenge, then, for our religious journey of the ten days of *teshuvah* is to cultivate an awareness of where we stand now. May the prayers we offer and the self-reflection we engage in help us achieve that sense of awareness of our distance from ourselves, and therefore from our fellow human beings and from God.

I want to end with a final bit of good news! For Rav Kook *shinui makom*, changing places, means not going from our homes into exile but the reverse – shaking ourselves out of our current state of estrangement, and striving with all of our might to return home, to the unquenchable divine light that burns within all of us. May the words we offer the Holy Blessed One, today and in the days ahead, bring us to that light. May they bring us home.

Le-shanah tovah tikatevu.

