

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775

### The Holy Thief: *Teshuvah* is Judaism's most precious gift

I love the High Holy Days. Everybody's here! It's so great to see people. And everyone looks so nice.

Even the rabbis of the Talmud encouraged their wives to buy new dresses to meet the New Year in finery. It's nice to clean up, dress up.

I like pomp and circumstance, once in a while. Creating a different kind of space, sharing the bima, the pulpit, with a gifted and knowledgeable colleague, Cantor Adelle.

No doubt this sacred season, these days of awe, call us to engage in just the right amount of formality to take pause, to take notice. *Erev. Rosh. Hashanah*. Not just another new moon, *rosh chodesh*, but *Rosh Hashanah* a New Year.

*Mah nishtana...* How is this night different? It is not a New Year welcomed in frivolity and merriment. But a New Year to which we are called, like young children... to the principal's office.

We straighten out our clothes, smooth down our hair, file in quietly... Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Are we up for some sort of award or did we mess up and not realize we'd have to clean it up? How long will we have to wait out here before being called in?

*Erev Rosh Hashanah* is no December 31<sup>st</sup> party. *Erev Rosh Hashanah* is our annual, collective, Jewish existential wake up call. The music, the liturgy, the cantor's wail, the rabbi's wagging finger... Am I living life well? Am I present in the lives of the people I say I love? Am I experiencing satisfaction?

While coming to synagogue is lovely and I hope uplifting and inspiring, it's just the means, the vehicle for facilitating a reflective moment, a moment of truth...

Is the baggage I carry around with me, from one year into the next, laden with any unfinished business I ought to tend to? Can I lighten my own load before turning this calendar page over to the next?

You know, Judaism, all religion for that matter, is ultimately about tending to our existential health. Rituals and rites, ceremonies and disciplined practices... Spontaneous prayer and outpourings of strong emotions... As well as rules, regulations, and rote learning...

The script, the *machzor*, is full of language about God, faith in God and deference to God's mysterious ways. Its words are the words of a certain time and place that has passed.

Don't get tripped up. The inner work, the existential work, the opportunity of the season has not changed.

The language, the pomp and circumstance, they point to the same opportunity about which sages pontificate and shamans allegorize...

The opportunity is ever before us, the opportunity to examine our own lives, assess what we like and don't like, and make adjustments.

In Jewish, we call this opportunity *TESHUVAH*, repentance, return. It is a cessation of avoidance and blame. It is a private and personal reckoning.

Notice I use the word opportunity. *Teshuvah* is an opportunity. It can't be mandated. It can't be outsourced. Not everybody engages. It requires honest reflection, true love for others as well as oneself, and a willingness to be vulnerable and to be wrong.

I've taught this lesson before and I'll teach it again because I believe *Teshuvah* may be the most precious gift of our tradition. The sages teach us that a person who has sinned and truly engaged in *Teshuvah*, a person who has truly recognized his or her mistake, genuinely acknowledged the error, apologized, and made better choices in similar situations...this person merits a greater portion in the world to come than the pious saint who has never sinned.

How can this be?

I think the pious saint who has never sinned is either a liar or lives such a monastic life that he or she simply hasn't been challenged, tempted, like the rest of us.

Last summer, beginning to think about the High Holy Days, I read a memoir entitled, *The Holy Thief*. The writer's story is colorful, larger than the lives most of us lead, but at the same time his story is just like ours, and that's why I want to talk about it.

His book begins like this:

*This book is my Teshuvah. It is my Return. For thirty years I lived a life of illusion. I was a magician of sorts. I specialized in cheap tricks, quick hits, and sleight of hand, especially when it came to writing checks. I got my audience's attention, then lured them into wanting to hand me their trust. I got them to believe in small miracles, if just for a moment, which was all I needed. And then I struck.*

Rabbi Mark Borovitz, from *Beit Teshuvah* in Los Angeles, is a second career rabbi. His first career landed him in prison. He is a self-defined *convicted mobster, gangster, con man, gambler, thief, and drunk*. His current life's work, *Beit Teshuvah*, is a house of worship /slash/ halfway house for Jewish ex-convicts and addicts in recovery.

As a rabbi, Mark Borovitz is the opposite of me. He is a huge presence. He is loud. He is a holy roller who handles a microphone like a rock star. His services rock. He moves hardened

criminals and honest-to-god-past-having-hit-rock-bottom drug addicts to reckon with themselves. He knows them. He listens to them. He cares about them... And often, he's the first real man in their lives, not to mention the first real man in their lives, who expects something from them.

I told you his story was dramatic. A sort of *Breaking Bad* in reverse...

And yet, what I really like about Rabbi Mark Borovitz, is he is really like all of us. His words, again:

*This book is my Teshuvah. It is my Return. For thirty years I lived a life of illusion. I was a magician of sorts. I specialized in cheap tricks, quick hits, and sleight of hand...*

It's so easy and it's so true.

We live lives of illusion.

We confuse the roles we play with who we are.

We learn to manipulate the roles we play to get what we want from people around us.

We create scenarios that serve our self-interests,

We idealize, we idolize...

We convince even ourselves that we do what we do because we have to...

We haven't all conned little old ladies out of their life savings, but some of us have.

We haven't all resorted to physical violence or emotional violence, but some of us have.

We haven't all spent money we didn't earn, but some of us have.

We haven't all taken people we once truly loved for granted, but some of us have.

We haven't all sacrificed our own dignity for a quick and easy high, but some of us have.

For those of us who have...

Remember the person who has sinned and truly engaged in *Teshuvah*, a person who has truly recognized his or her mistakes, genuinely acknowledged the errors, apologized, and made better choices in similar situations...this person merits a greater portion in the world to come than the pious saint who has never sinned.

Now, I don't really know from the world to come. But I do know that facing and accepting my demons, my less-than-pretty side every so often makes me more loving and forgiving of others. It helps me love other people better because while I may make less-than-favorable judgments

about them, I always carry with me a memory what it feels like to be ugly with my own words and behavior.

Empathy allows me to forgive. When I'm more forgiving, the people around me relax.

When I do witness someone else miss the mark, I am quickly cognizant of my own need and desire to be vigilant. Life goes so much smoother.

Forget about all the beautiful paintings of heaven that hang in palaces like the Louvre and the Vatican. The world to come, paradise is here and now... Martin Buber called it the I-Thou moment... A precious moment of connection, senses are heightened, movement and speech flow effortlessly, breath is deep and energizing, life is good. The zone...

These moments are fleeting. But they are real.

*Teshuvah* is remembering that every moment is an opportunity to practice connection and love, to forgive, and give it another go.

*Teshuvah* isn't just for us to do with others, it's also for us to do with ourselves.

We can be better people. We all have room for improvement. Our mistakes may embarrass us but they don't taint us. Only the biblical Cain carried the burden of an identifying mark for his sin for the rest of his life. He literally murdered his brother.

Our failings make us wiser, more resourceful, more loving, more forgiving, and happier when things go right. Ultimately this is what the rabbis are saying when they praise the *holy thief*.

The world is a better place, life goes much smoother, when we learn from our successes *and* our mistakes, not to mention the collective wisdom and others glean and record for our benefit.

We are all works in progress. We might engage in that work privately or in safe networks of family and friends. We might take baby steps or make big changes.

We are also all members of a tribe. Yes we share human qualities, but we gather here together tonight, because we also share the Jewish autumn ritual of turning a new leaf.

The aroma of pumpkin spice lattes is in the air, the call of the shofar will soon rouse our nostalgic and primal inner tribal yearnings.

The call of the season invites us to entertain the possibility of *Teshuvah*. To repent. To take note. To return to shared values and shared visions.

No matter how many times it takes... I believe in second, third, and quite frankly infinite chances.

Each time the lesson is there for the picking, moving us closer to the lives we want to be living.

Ultimate satisfaction with what we have.

(A deep breath...)

*Shanah tovah!*