



"Returning to Our Best Selves"

By Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

The process of *teshuva*—of "return" or "turning"—that is at the core of this season in the Jewish calendar, is actually a universal idea: the profound need to elevate ourselves from where we are, to look at our failings, and to resolve to do better. As we start a new year, we look at the old one, to see where we have been and to determine where we are going.

The awareness of the need for change may come upon us suddenly, as if someone shined a bright light into our eyes in the middle of the night and wrenched us out of a deep sleep. Or it may develop over time, like a sunrise that wakes us gradually, so that we cannot pinpoint exactly what time it was when our surroundings became clearly visible. It may emerge as a pervasive feeling of sinfulness, or it may reflect a more nagging sense that we are just not living up to what we expect of ourselves.

How do we deal with this feeling? We can try to ignore it, as we might ignore a splinter that causes us sharp pain, but only now and then. Or we can decide to look at it carefully and remove it, knowing that it will hurt more right now, but it will not cause us pain in the future.

If we want to remove this feeling of disquiet, we must look into our hearts and ask hard questions: What have we done wrong? What have we neglected to do? I am not talking about criminal acts; we do not have to look too hard to find them. I am talking about everyday transgressions: Have we misled our customers? Spread rumors about our neighbors? Showed disrespect to our parents? Spoken too harshly to our children? Whatever we have done, we must be willing to look at it and let ourselves experience a feeling of regret.

Regret is essential to *teshuvah*, but we cannot allow it to become so overwhelming that we give in to despair—"It's no use; I can't possibly change"—or drown our distress with alcohol, drugs, or mindless "entertainments." We cannot bury it under excuses—"I can't help it; it's the way I am"—or dismiss it as just part of being human: "No one is perfect. I'm OK; you're OK." We must feel regret and we must verbalize it: to ourselves, to God, and, as hard as it may be, to those we have hurt.

The feeling of regret tells us that we have begun to change, but how do we know the change we have made is real and lasting? We are facing a new

direction, but where will we find the energy and the courage to begin our journey down the new path? The energy we need comes from our resolve to move away from who we were and come closer to being who we want to be. Whatever our resolutions, it will not be easy. If we allow ourselves to become complacent, we may fall into old habits or yield to new temptations.

The process of *teshuvah* is never finished. It is a lifelong journey, an ongoing striving to do better and to be better, to do more to help our fellow Man and to come closer to God.

Our Sages tell us that the creation of *teshuvah* preceded the creation of the world. It is a process so powerful that it allows us to defy the laws of physics and suspend the linearity of time. Through *teshuvah*, we can change ourselves so much that the misdeeds of our past are erased—in some mystical way—because the person who committed them no longer exists.

Wherever we are, no matter how far we have fallen, the opportunity to repent and change is always there for every one of us. We do not need a fixed time—like the High Holidays—to tell us to examine our lives and resolve to do better. We can find the inspiration to begin this journey through the significant events in our lives—marriage, parenthood, the death of a loved one, even a new job.

In the High Holiday liturgy, we say "Turn us to you, O Lord, and we shall return." God gives us the ability to see what we need to do and helps us along the way,

but we must do our part if we are to return to Him and to our best selves.

If we begin today, we can change ourselves and the world.

This essay was originally featured in "On Faith," an online conversation about religion hosted by *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*.