



YAMIM NORAIM
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Teshuvah Lectures
based on the teachings of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE: ROSH HASHANAH

Teaching 1 (Rosh Hashanah Evening): Introduction	3
Teaching 2 (1st Day Rosh Hashanah): Unity.....	8
Teaching 3 (2nd Day Rosh Hashanah): Expansiveness.....	13

PART TWO: YOM KIPPUR

Teaching 4 (Kol Nidre): Sensitivity.....	19
Teaching 5 (Yom Kippur Day): The Bark and the Fruit.....	25
Teaching 6 (Neilah): Ascent.....	31

PART ONE: ROSH HASHANAH

Teaching 1 (Rosh Hashanah Evening): Introduction

"For a long time now an inner struggle goes on in me, and I feel prodded by a mighty force to speak about teshuvah. All my thoughts are focused on this theme alone. Teshuvah holds a primary place in the teachings of Torah and in life; all the hopes of the individual and of society depend on it. It embodies a divine commandment that is, on the hand, the easiest to carry out, since a stirring of the heart toward teshuvah is a valid expression of teshuvah. And on the other hand it is the most difficult to perform, since it has not yet been effectuated fully in the world and in life."¹

With these words begins *Orot HaTeshuvah*, "The Lights of Penitence," by Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, whose work will be the inspiration for our learning on these Yamim Noraim.

Born in 1865, in Latvia, Rav Kook was one of those great souls who fired on all cylinders in many different realms; he was a learned scholar, a leader of people, a nation-builder, a visionary. He was a mystic -- practicing kabbalist. But he did not allow himself the luxury of remaining in private communion with the Divine. Instead, because he was also a passionate Zionist, he moved to Eretz Yisrael in 1904, and accepted the responsibility of public office. He served as rabbi in Yaffa for 10 years, then briefly as Chief Rabbi in Jerusalem, and in 1921, he became the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel, a post he held for 14 years until his death in 1935.

Why Rav Kook?

Partly because he wrote *Orot HaTeshuvah*. Very few have written as extensively on the phenomenon of teshuvah -- usually translated as repentance, penitence, response, or return. Virtually no one has written as penetratingly and profoundly.

But, to paraphrase Kook himself, this year I feel prodded by a mighty force to speak about Rav Kook for another reason: it seems to me that his worldview, his understanding of Judaism, and his model of leadership are vitally important for us right now.

We are living in a very challenging and challenged time. As Jews, as Americans, as Israelis, as free people -- we are becoming ever more divided, ever more dysfunctional, ever closer to what I think are very dangerous precipices. Most importantly, we seem increasingly unable to respond to the difficulties in our world in a healthy, productive way. So I imagine that many of us are coming to shul on these Yamim Noraim struggling with how to make sense of such a world and how to live in it: how to be a Jew, how to be a person, how to be. How to get through the day without giving in to despair for our future, and how to do our part to make that future better.

I'm sad to say that much of what passes for religious insight and leadership (including within the Jewish community) seems at best irrelevant, and at worst, really destructive. We are in need of a model of religious leadership -- of a Judaism -- that is both authentically rooted in our tradition,

1. *Orot HaTeshuvah*, Introduction, in *Abraham Isaac Kook -- The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters and Poems*, tr. and ed. by Ben Zion Bokser (Paulist Press: 1978) (hereafter "Kook"), p. 41.

and meaningfully responsive to today's world. So I feel prodded by a mighty force to speak about Rav Kook because I believe he is one such model.

Kook too lived in a time of great division, and strife. He lived through World War I; he was travelling when the war broke out, and was unable to get back home to Eretz Yisrael for several years. He saw growing anti-semitism in the world around him, including Hitler's rise to power. And he was at the center of all the tension and divisiveness within the Jewish community, especially in the land of Israel. Indeed Kook was himself a magnet for controversy. He was the victim of vitriolic accusations -- from the mainstream Jewish authorities -- of the kind we'd now associate with the worst of the hate-mongering media. They accused him of heresy, calling for his excommunication.

Why? Because Rav Kook was an Orthodox Rabbi, a Hasid -- *and* he was a pluralist, who advocated for tolerance and love of all Jews. Because he was a committed Jew, actively rebuilding Jerusalem and Israel -- *and* a committed universalist, who loved and valued all people, decrying naked nationalism for its own sake as a sin. Because Kook's Judaism -- his understanding of the Torah -- was expansive enough to be at one and the same time profoundly spiritual, and completely practical, with great sensitivity to and respect for current worldly concerns. Because he was an original thinker and innovative problem-solver. Because Kook had a vision not only of the heavens, but of a path to the renewal of the Jewish people and the establishment of a nation. Because in the face of great divisiveness he taught and modelled unification; and in response to attack, he made peace.

Not surprisingly, he upset people. And it's why I think his message is so important for us today.

I'll give you an example of who he was.² Some time around 1920, in one of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem, a group of workers was under pressure to complete a particular building, and they continued working during Rosh Hashanah. What could be a greater desecration? To do construction work on Rosh Hashanah, *davka* in Jerusalem? The neighbors they immediately notified the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rav Kook. We can imagine what they expected -- hoped -- Rav Kook would do.

The Rav sent a messenger to the construction site -- with a shofar in his hand. He approached the workers, who were surprised to see him, and wished them a Shanah Tovah. He then announced that Rav Kook had sent him to blow the shofar for them, so they could fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. He respectfully asked them just to take a brief break from their work and listen. Then he recited the blessing, and blew the shofar.

As the story goes (I wasn't there), the workers put down their tools and gathered around the shofar blower. Some began to cry. They stood shaken and confused, absorbed in thought. Questions began to pour out, one after another. What has happened to us? Where are we? What have we come to? When the shofar-blowing was over, without a word, they simply decided to stop working. Some asked the messenger if they could accompany him. They quickly changed their clothes and went to services at Rav Kook's yeshivah.

2. Adapted from *Silver from the Land of Israel: A New Light on the Sabbath and Holidays from the Writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook* (Chanan Morrison), p. 62 (based on Mo'adei HaRe'iyah vol. II, p. 329).

Why? Maybe they were moved by nostalgia, transported back to their homelands, to their parents' or grandparents' homes and synagogues. Maybe the sound of the shofar stirred the spark in their souls.

And of course the story speaks to the power of the shofar to raise what we call *hirhurei teshuvah* -- intimations of teshuvah, questions like "where are we" and "what has happened to us." But it speaks also to the power of Rav Kook's inclusivity and love to do exactly the same thing. Obviously, doesn't always work this way. People don't always abandon their prior way of being and follow us just because we've reached out to them in love.

But the more important question is: how was Rav Kook able to be this way, as a leader? Certainly he was blessed with a great mind, greatness of character. He had a great soul. But really his way of being came from his theology, and most particularly from his understanding of teshuvah, on which as he said, "all the hopes of the individual and of society depend."

Kook understood teshuvah as the process by which we not only address particular failings, character traits, and actions or inactions, but the process by which we discern how to be in the world -- how to be a human being, how to be a Jew, how to be the particular individual that we are. And not only that. He spoke not only of our own personal work that that we do on these Days of Awe (and hopefully all year), but also of public or general teshuvah, calling for the teshuvah of the nation, the Jewish people as a whole, and the world. And he spoke of the interconnectedness of the two: the relationship between individual teshuvah, and national teshuvah, world teshuvah. And I believe that the Judaism Rav Kook taught and lived -- his understanding of teshuvah -- is exactly what we need in our world today:

"The more a person contemplates the nature of teshuvah, the more he will find in it the source of heroism and the most basic content for a life of practicality *and* idealism."³

So that's why I wanted to teach him this year.

I do so, however, with a couple of caveats. First, Kook's writing is very dense, and difficult to parse. So I've put together a packet with some passages from his writing, as well as a bibliography, which will be available after the service. If you wish, take it home and spend some time reading and discussing it. But for the most part we're not going to read him together, here. Second, because Rav Kook was such an integrated thinker, and saw everything as interconnected, it's very hard to tease out particular themes and understand them in isolation; everything relates to everything else, and becomes incomplete or distorted when considered alone. I'll do my best to present some core ideas that I think are particularly helpful and important, but really, what you're going to hear is less Rav Kook than me influenced by my study of Rav Kook. So if anything seems untrue, incomplete -- blame it on me, not him, and go and read the original.

For tonight, here's just a taste of how Kook thought about the process of teshuvah

Rav Kook identifies three kinds of teshuvah, three entry points to teshuvah.

The first is teshuvah according to nature. This is teshuvah inspired by our internal sense that something isn't right, that we've acted contrary to our natural state. It might be something

3. Orot HaTeshuvah 12:2 (Kook, p. 85).

physical (i.e., ways in which we have been inattentive to the needs of our own bodies, the physical world around us, or caused damage, resulting in a physical malaise or concrete problems) or spiritual (i.e., violations of our inner sense of right and wrong, causing a spiritual malaise or spiritual pain, anxiety about our behavior). We start doing teshuvah because we hurt, something's wrong.

Then there's teshuvah according to religious tradition. This is teshuvah rooted in and inspired by our study of Torah, our prayer, the communal expression of behavioral norms (halakhah). We know that we've done wrong because the Torah says x, and we've done y. We do teshuvah because it's Rosh Hashanah; it's what we're supposed to do now.

Then there's a third level of teshuvah, dependent on the other two and including them both, which is teshuvah according to reason. This level -- the highest and most important -- is "inspired by a comprehensive outlook on life that came to crystallization after the natural and religious phases of teshuvah had registered their influence."⁴

This is really remarkable. Some people are inclined toward natural teshuvah: they are primarily guided by their own inner conscience and voice. Others are inclined toward religious teshuvah: responding primarily to the voice of the Torah and Jewish tradition. One can begin the process of teshuvah from either place. The voice of the Divine calls us through both media -- through the Torah, and through our own conscience, the voice of our own heart and soul. That's why Kook sent the shofar to the secular Zionists doing construction work on Rosh Hashanah; the shofar is the instrument that speaks both languages.

But for Kook, neither our own natural instincts nor the religious tradition can be trusted standing alone; each needs to be informed and shaped by the other. And the ultimate path to growth, change, healing, is an integration of the two.

We'll close for tonight with Kook's own words, from one of his Rosh Hashanah teachings when he was Chief Rabbi of Israel. In it, his specific concern is the growing division within the Jewish people, but his words are relevant to all kinds of division and strife. So feel free to substitute for "religious" and "secular" whatever particular conflict is on your mind -- right and left, democrat and republican, liberal and orthodox, Israeli and Arab:

We stand at the threshold of a new year. May it bring blessings to us and all Israel. We are bestirred with hope that all the depressing conditions we experienced in the past year will pass from us. And from the depths of our hearts let us say: May there be an end to the old year and its troubles and may the new year and its blessings commence.

We are called upon to examine our actions and draw closer to the light of teshuvah, which brings redemption and healing to the world. . . .

It appears to me that we are divided into two camps . . . the "religious" (haredi), and the "secularists" (hofshi). These are new names which had never been heard of in the past. We knew that people are not alike in their characteristics, especially in their spiritual disposition, which is the basis of life. But that there should be a special name . . . this we never knew of. It seems to me that on this subject it is appropriate to say that the former years were better than these.

4. Orot HaTeshuvah 1 (Kook, pp. 43-45).

. . . The emphasis placed on these two names. . . so that each one can say: "I belong to this camp," and the others also can say: "I belong to that camp," with each one being satisfied with his position -- this blocks the road of repair and improvement on both sides. The one who regards himself as belonging to the camp they call the "religious" looks down on the other camp they call "secular". As to giving any thought about improvement, of taking stock of oneself and engaging in teshuvah, he at once fixes his view on the other camp which he sees as . . . stripped of Torah and mitzvot; and he thinks to himself that the call to full teshuvah applies only to them . . . but not to himself. On the other hand, the "secularist". . . certainly thinks that the whole concept of teshuvah is part of the lifestyle of the religious which does not apply to him. It thus turns out that we are defective on both sides, and whence will come the healing for our inner affliction? . . . It would be much more helpful for each person to be absorbed in self-assessment, and to probe his shortcomings, while viewing others charitably, for there may indeed be in the other great hidden treasures which elude the eye. We must recognize that there exists in each camp, and especially in every person, a hidden force drawing him toward goodness . . .

Let us be known by the one name Klal Yisrael. . .

Let us know that in each camp there is much to be improved upon, and much light and good that each can receive from the other. . . . Then there will be realized in us the holiest of our prayers which we are summoned to recite with all our strength:

"And they shall form one fellowship to do Your will. . .

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְּלִבָּם אֶחָד, לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנְךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלָם.

. . .with a whole heart."⁵

5. Ma'amore Ha-Rayah, pp. 76-77, in *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, tr. and ed. by Ben Zion Bokser (Ben Yehuda Press: 2006) (hereafter "Essential Writings"), pp. 37-39.

Teaching 2 (1st Day Rosh Hashanah): Unity

TEKIYAH SHEVARIM-TERUAH TEKIYAH

Whole, broken, whole. Many commentators have focused on this pattern as a model for the process of teshuvah (repentance, repair, return, response). In the past I've taught it from a psychological perspective. We think we're fine, whole. Then we shatter the illusions about ourselves and our world, and experience our brokenness. Then we reconstruct ourselves anew, to be truly whole.

This year I want to look at the pattern according to the teachings of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the inspiration for our learning this year. I say "inspiration" as a caveat. I'm not purporting to offer a systematic study of Rav Kook's teachings; it's really more me influenced and inspired by him.

But I hope inspiration in another sense as well. As I said last night, I feel strongly inspired by and drawn to Rav Kook -- scholar, practicing Kabbalist and mystic, Zionist, nation-builder, visionary, Chief Rabbi first of Jerusalem and then of entire land of Israel, for a total of 16 years prior to his death in 1935 -- because I believe that his understanding of Judaism, and his model of religious leadership are vitally important for us right now.

The focus of the Yamim Noraim is of course teshuvah -- the personal work of *heshbon hanefesh* (accounting of the soul), repentance, repair. But this year I would feel remiss if I spoke only of personal teshuvah, without addressing how that private work fits into the context of the world in which we live -- increasingly so broken, frustrating, frightening. How to be in such a world? How to make a difference in such a world? I don't know of a better teacher and leadership model than Rav Kook, or a better path to healing than his understanding of teshuvah.

And here's my roadmap. Today and tomorrow we'll be looking at Kook's understanding of the essential nature of teshuvah. Today we'll focus on the personal level, where it begins. Tomorrow, on the implications for society as a whole, and how to *be* in society as a whole. Then on Yom Kippur we'll look at some specific issues, and how they play out on both levels.

So, tekiyah- shevarim-teruah - tekiyah. How is this a metaphor for teshuvah?

According to Rav Kook, we begin with a whole note because teshuvah originates in and with oneness: our connection to a larger organic whole, around us and inherent within us, at our core. Some of us (Kook and myself included) call that the spark of the Divine in each of us, the essential holiness of the soul, a Godliness that permeates and vitalizes each of us, indeed all creation. But if God-language gets in your way, just call it Oneness. That oneness is what teshuvah is all about. It's the source of our impulse to do teshuvah, it's the ultimate goal of our teshuvah, and re-connecting to it is the first step in the process. Tekiyah.

Shevarim-Teruah. Once we've reconnected to that overall oneness, the root of who we *are*, then we begin to look at the specific details of who we have *become*. We address the broader level of our *midot* (character traits) -- our strengths, our weaknesses, our personality -- represented by the shevarim, a series of 3 shorter notes. And we look at the even greater detail of our specific behaviors -- words and deeds -- represented by the 9 shorter staccato notes of the teruah.

Then finally, after (by means of) all that detailed work, we arrive at another tekiyah -- the unification of everything.

Technically, the three notes of shevarim together, and the nine staccato teruot together, should be exactly the same length as one tekiyah: $1=3=9=1$

That's Rav Kook's notion of the process of teshuvah, which we'll unpack in a few minutes.

But first, we note that beginning with tekiyah -- with generalized oneness -- is counterintuitive. For one thing, we don't begin our teshuvah by focusing on our wrongdoing, or really on anything negative at all. Healing begins with the positive -- by reconnecting to oneness, to the best part of ourselves, our spark of holiness.

Second, we might expect to start our "penitence" with the concrete mistakes we made, the specific sins we committed. We fix what we can, apologize as we need to, and commit to not doing it again. *Then* we might go a little deeper, and examine our overall personality and character, to figure out why we made those mistakes, why we behaved as we did -- and work to fix that. Then, *maybe*, we'd get to the level of thinking about how it all fits in the big picture. But no, Kook says, it's exactly the opposite. We start by reclaiming our essential humanity, restoring our connection to universal oneness.

Actually, our liturgy supports him on this. There's no confession on Rosh Hashanah; only later, on Yom Kippur, do we particularize our sins in confession. Today, on Rosh Hashanah we focus on "crowning God as Sovereign." By which we really mean what Kook is talking about here -- connecting with the oneness of the Divine as the source of all.

Why start there?

First, from a practical perspective, it's very hard to change our behavior without being centered, plugged in. We know we're much more likely to behave badly when we're feeling disconnected and empty; when "we're not ourselves." And the worse we behave, the more disconnected we feel. In that state, it's not so helpful to be overly self-critical; that's as likely as not to result in our wallowing in guilt but changing nothing, or spiraling into depression. On the other hand, when we re-root ourselves in something beyond ourselves, when we open the channels of our vitality, we have much more energy and discipline to do better.

But it's more than just a practical issue. We begin by reconnecting to the fundamental integrity and oneness of all things (or at least an inkling of it) because without that, teshuvah -- real repair -- is impossible.

For one thing, in order to meaningfully make amends for and repair our wrongdoing, we have to understand the damage our wrongdoing has caused. How can we do that without a sense of the whole? If I experience the world in an atomized way, oblivious to the larger context, how can I know the real impact, the real meaning, of my action? Without a wholistic vision, we have no way of distinguishing between small transgressions and major harm.

It's true of repair we owe to others. I'm sure we've all been on the receiving end of a sincere apology, that nevertheless felt shallow, unsatisfying -- not because the person didn't care, but because they didn't really get the implications of their behavior.

And if it's true of apologies to others, it's even more true when it comes to repairing the self.

“The self is an organic whole.” This is one of those truths that everyone knows, and none of us *really* knows. Even just at the physical level. We all know that our body is an organic whole; and we all have to learn it. We have to develop a sensitivity to the way our own bodies function systemically -- that an injury here can cause pain there. And even with something so concrete and fairly obvious, mostly we still need an expert -- a doctor or physical therapist -- to remind us of the connection. And even then, when we hear about research connecting poor oral hygiene with heart disease, I can’t believe I’m the only one who thinks -- even knowing what I know -- “that’s crazy”!

How much harder then to really grasp that our *entire* being -- not just the body but our hearts and minds and souls -- are an integrated whole. We know it, but we have to learn it. As we engage in teshuvah -- beginning with just trying to tap into that oneness -- we begin to see that all our individual actions, our personality traits and qualities, aren’t individual, particular deeds or traits at all -- they’re all interconnected. We begin to see the way poor oral hygiene -- lashon hara (negative speech, falsehood, harsh words, gossip) -- might cause heart disease. We begin to sense that a general malaise and lack of energy might be symptomatic of not getting enough spiritual exercise.

Our goal is to understand that those broken notes -- the shevarim and teruah -- aren’t separate, individualized notes at all. They’re actually made of exactly the same stuff as the whole note. It’s all *ruah* (breath, spirit) passing through or not passing through an instrument, creating sound and silence, just in different combinations. So that when we do address our particular character traits, and specific instances of our behavior, we can address our failings and errors more effectively -- more accurately -- because we can address them holistically, as part of the larger oneness of our whole selves.

But there’s an even deeper reason why Kook sees the process of teshuvah beginning with tekiyah/oneness. It’s based on a theology -- not unique to Kook, but prevalent throughout Jewish mysticism -- that understands all creation as a specific manifestation of Oneness. “Pre-creation”, so to speak, there was only undifferentiated Oneness, in which everything existed, but only in potential. We can call that Oneness God, or *Ein Sof* (infinity/eternity, literally “without limit”). And everything that exists is simply an expression of that oneness in specific form. By way of metaphor, the process of creation is like holding a prism up to light, to make a beautiful rainbow. We haven’t changed the quality of the light, we’ve just revealed -- separated out, realized -- all the particular colors that were there, in potential, within the light.

And that prism -- creation -- is necessary for two reasons. One, it’s necessary in order to fully express, in actuality not only potential, the oneness (i.e., without the prism, the colors would never be visible). And two, it’s necessary because through that process of teasing out and expressing, everything gets refined, elevated, and perfected, to be eventually reunited in oneness again, but in a healed, perfected form. Tikkun olam.

Now -- and here’s the thing -- the process of teshuvah as Kook understands it (i.e., connect to oneness, then address particular traits and deeds, and then ascend to oneness again) isn’t merely parallel to the process of creation. It’s the *essence* of creation; the purpose of creation is to perfect itself. In other words, the nature of this oneness that we’re apart of and that is within us -- the essential holiness of the soul -- *isn’t static*. It’s actually a yearning toward improvement -- an urge to perfect life -- that is implanted within us. It *is* teshuvah (repair, transformation).

“Teshuvah is inspired by the yearning of all existence to be better, purer, more vigorous and on a higher plane than it is.”⁶

Kook alludes to a kind of “river of teshuvah” -- of aspiration -- flowing through everything, implanted within everything, on every level of being. And teshuvah, then, isn’t so much a process that we initiate, that we *do*; it’s something we join, participate in. “Teshuvah,” Kook says, “is always present in the heart”.⁷ Our task is simply to open ourselves to it. To return and reconnect to an aspirational yearning, a longing for re-unification and harmony, that is both within us and beyond us, encompassing the totality of all. Tekiyah.

And that oneness is the foundation of real teshuvah for another reason. According to Kook, the fundamental quality of all wrongdoing and negativity -- of any kind -- is fragmentation, separation and division.

It’s true in terms of causation: “Every sin, even the slightest, plants in a person hostility toward some creature . . . ”⁸ Wrongdoing causes fragmentation -- it’s what severs our connection to oneness to begin with. And fragmentation in turn causes wrongdoing. Once our thoughts and behavior place us in this world of fragmentation, and we become less and less able to connect to or even sense oneness, we cause more and more division and fragmentation.

And the relationship between wrongdoing and fragmentation is not only causal, but existential. If all things are of one essence -- all things are part of this aspirational unity that we call God -- then *nothing*, when it is connected and part of that oneness, in the proper context, in the right measure, channeled and expressed in a pure way, is inherently evil. Nothing. Rather, wrongdoing, sin, *is* nothing more (and nothing less!) than fragmentation, dislocation, and disconnection.

Think of a jigsaw puzzle. None of the pieces in a puzzle are “bad.” But taken out of context, by themselves, some of them may not be too appealing. Moreover, when the pieces are put together in the wrong way, they push against each other, and bend or break. And, the overall picture they create will be distorted, and likely pretty ugly. That’s Kook’s definition of sin -- pieces of the puzzle of existence out of place.

That’s the main reason that teshuvah really begins with our reconnecting to the source of oneness. It’s because that’s what teshuvah *is*. *All repair -- all teshuvah -- is fundamentally unification*. That’s the source, that’s the goal, that’s the process.⁹ It’s not about “judging” in the sense of “that part of me is evil”, but rather about discerning the way in which our disconnection and fragmentation (something out of place, out of balance, out of context) is resulting in negativity. It’s the process of doing the jigsaw puzzle -- finding the proper place for every piece. And just as when you do a jigsaw puzzle, you have to periodically step back and look at the

6. Orot HaTeshuvah 6:1 (Kook, pages 56-57)

7. Orot HaTeshuvah 6:2 (Kook, page 57)

8. Orot HaTeshuvah 12:4 (Kook, p. 85).

9. See, e.g., Orot HaTeshuvah 12:5 (Kook, pp. 85-86):

When a person sins he has entered the world of fragmentation, and then every particular being stands by itself, and evil is evil in and of itself, and it is evil and destructive. When he does teshuvah out of love there at once shines on him the light from the world of unity, where everything is integrated into one whole, and in the context of the whole there is no evil at all. The evil is joined with the good to invest it with more attractiveness, and to enhance its significance. Thus the willful wrongs become transformed into real virtues.

picture on the cover of the box -- so too the process of teshuvah begins with a reconnection to the overall oneness. A reminder of the ultimate vision. A reminder that there *is* an ultimate vision. Tekiyah.

What does this look like in practice? How do we reconnect to the oneness, our inner source of holiness? On the hand it's really hard to get it, and even harder to hold it. On the other hand, all you have to do is start. It doesn't have to be tekiyah gedolah -- a consistent, ongoing sense of the overarching oneness of all things -- we'll do that tomorrow! We don't get it all at once. Nor is the process of teshuvah linear or predictable; it doesn't always go in order. Depending on how far we've strayed from our true selves, we may have to do some specific repair before we can even begin to sense that aspirational root. That's why we have so many sets of shofar blasts -- each set going from oneness to separation and back to oneness, over and over.

To start, only connect -- even a little. There are any number of paths. Obviously it's a good idea to recommit to the core rhythms of Jewish living: tefillah (prayer), talmud Torah (studying Torah), and observing mitzvot -- ritual mitzvot like Shabbat or hearing the shofar, and ethical mitzvot. Beyond that what works best is a highly personal. Some people need contemplative time alone, perhaps in nature; others need deep conversation with trusted loved ones. For some prayer in words (either the formal liturgy, or simply conversation with God) is most effective; others do well with silent meditation. Some people journal; some connect through music.

Here are some helpful questions to ask yourself, from Merle Feld, a teacher of writing as a spiritual practice:

Recall a situation from this past year in which you felt proud of yourself -- doesn't need to be on the Olympic gold level, some big public achievement -- even better actually if it's something small, quiet, something that had private meaning for you: you overcame an old grudge; you worked on mastering a new skill or progressed in refining some desired inner quality; you helped a family member, a stranger, or devoted yourself to some act of tikkun olam. The important thing -- it was a time when you felt, "that's me at my best," I want to be "that me" more often. Reflect on why/how the best part of you came out in that situation. How can you be that fully realized, special "you" more often in the coming year?

Think about the past year and recall something you did that gave you deep pleasure, something that felt nourishing for you -- what was it? . . . Consider the direction you are traveling in -- are you remembering to keep at your center that which gives meaning to your life? Stop and refocus on what that is and how to live with that at the center.

In other words, where and when do you felt most alive? Where are you connected, energized, expansive? When do you experience yourself as more than yourself, part of something bigger, a larger oneness? Connect to that. That's the beginning of teshuvah.

The awareness, the connection, may come and go in an instant -- like a flash of lightening. But if we keep at it, the lightening will flash again, and again, and again -- each time providing a little more illumination to help us navigate the dark places in our lives, each time subtly transforming our consciousness, our character, our deeds. Little by little, these flashes of oneness accumulate -- *Orot HaTeshuvah*, "The Lights of Teshuvah" -- until they begin to unite, and through them, we ourselves begin to unite. And that makes it possible for *us* to unite.

Teaching 3 (2nd Day Rosh Hashanah): Expansiveness

מִן הַמְצִיר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה, עָנְנִי בַמְרֹחֵב יָהּ. "Out of narrow straits I've called out to God. God answered me with expansiveness" (Psalms 118:4). The mouth of the shofar is narrow, and then it grows broader. This alludes to the path of teshuvah. . . . [Of course] we are engaged in personal teshuvah. But on Rosh Hashanah we rise to the level of the desire of teshuvah not only for the entire nation -- "recite the malkhuyot before Me in order to coronate me over you" (Rosh Hashanah 16a), but for the entire world: "Rule over the entire world in Your glory."¹⁰

Yesterday we spoke about the order of shofar blasts -- whole, separate, whole -- as a metaphor for the work of teshuvah. Today we're going to look at a different way the shofar is a metaphor, based not the pattern of blasts, but on the shape of the instrument: from narrowness to expanse.

On the simplest level, this is a call to broaden the scope of our concern and action. I begin with my own spiritual health and well-being, but then I open outward. This is the model of the Prayers of Brokenness and Healing in our prayerbook, Machzor Lev Shalem.

But Kook is actually speaking of something much more profound. What he's saying is that just as the *notes* of the shofar point to the essential process of teshuvah (as we said yesterday, *teshuvah is unification -- returning everything to its proper place within the oneness*), the *shape* of the shofar points to the essential *quality* of that process: *teshuvah is about expansiveness*.

This is very important. The unification we're talking about is never accomplished by reduction or narrowing, but always by expansion -- by becoming *more* comprehensive, *more* inclusive.

Now when we talk about teshuvah as expansion, we're saying two things. One is that the *context* of repair and repentance expands -- from individual teshuvah, to public or national teshuvah. The other is that the process of teshuvah, at any level, is one of ever-expanding oneness.

Let's take them one at a time.

First, the context of teshuvah expands; we move outward from private teshuvah (our own personal striving for elevation and betterment), to what Kook calls public teshuvah.¹¹ As we said yesterday, there is an aspirational striving -- a yearning for perfection, elevation, and holiness that we call teshuvah -- implanted in every human soul. And not only in every human soul. It flows through all existence, at every level, in the "world soul". Communities, societies, and nations also have an inherent need, desire and responsibility to do teshuvah. And the key is: just as the breath going through the shofar is one breath, expanding ever-wider, so too private teshuvah, and public teshuvah, are all of one essence -- one flow of aspiration, in ever widening circles. We'll come back to that.

10. Mo'adei Hare'iyah, p. 60.

11. See Orot HaTeshuvah 6:1 (Kook, pages 56-57):

Teshuvah is inspired by the yearning of *all* existence to be better, purer, more vigorous and on a higher plane than it is. Within this yearning is a hidden life-force for overcoming every factor that limits and weakens existence. The particular teshuvah of the individual and *certainly of the group* draws its strength from this source of life, which is always active with never ending vigor.

For now, the second point: the process of healing itself -- whether the teshuvah of an individual or a nation -- is about an ever-expanding oneness. We spoke yesterday about the necessity of really *getting* that the self is an organic, integrated whole. As we continue with teshuvah, we expand our conception of oneness to include all existence. In all modalities, and at all levels, everyone and everything is integrated, all of a piece, *one*.

Now I know this is not a new concept -- it's something a lot of us can articulate, and that some of us would say we believe. It is in fact a classic mystical understanding of the Shma. Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad: all is One, there is nothing other than the One, and we call this Oneness God. And it's what we mean by "crowning God as sovereign" on Rosh Hashanah. But even among those of us who understand this, rarely can we live it, and rarely do we get the full implications of it. Our understanding of oneness, is itself fragmented.

In the physical realm, science has led the way. Physicists have taught us that all matter is comprised of the same "stuff:" energy. Evolutionary science, medicine, environmental science. all points to the oneness of all physical reality. In the interpersonal realm, the social sciences have given us systems theory; we analyze and try to heal a family or organization as an organic whole. And of course the Torah teaches *v'ahavta l'rea'akha kamokha* (love your fellow as yourself), long understood as the responsibility to see and act on the shared image of God in every human face.

But Kook goes much further: thoughts, ideas, viewpoints, feelings, yearnings, spiritual strivings -- as well as thought systems, philosophies, political theories, religions -- these too are all of one essence. Every thought, he says, whether something that just pops into your head or a complete intellectual discipline, has its place; it's part of this oneness.

And teshuvah -- this ever-expanding unification -- involves integrating all thoughts and ideas, all systems of thinking, into a coherent whole, even those that seem disparate or foreign. Kook calls this ability -- this higher level of teshuvah -- "higher comprehensiveness." It's about training our consciousness to see the way that every thought and belief is in some way an expression of the aspirational oneness -- that holy spark -- that we've said is the root of all things. It's about striving for an almost God's-eye view, from which the "higher unity" of all things (however seemingly contradictory) is revealed.

Here's an example, one that Kook himself uses: creationism (the Bible) versus evolution. For Kook, the apparent contradiction between the Bible and evolution is simply the result of narrow thinking, a failure of "higher comprehensiveness." In other words, the people who have trouble with this (from the creationists to Christopher Hitchens), don't really understand the Bible from a high enough perspective. They probably don't understand Darwin too well either. Some of us have been doing together a close study of the early chapters of Genesis. And when you study the text closely, it becomes obvious that not only is a literal reading of the text inadvisable and impossible, but that the text itself points to an evolutionary process in the development of all things. Indeed, the very process of teshuvah as we've been discussing it -- an aspirational yearning of all creation to perfect itself -- is itself suggestive of and consistent with evolutionary theory. In other words, if your religion causes you to disdain or be threatened by science, or your science causes you to disdain or be threatened by religion, it's because you don't yet understand either from a high enough perspective.

This is the goal of teshuvah -- attaining an almost God's-eye view. It's also the path to getting there.

We spoke yesterday about sin being caused by and causing fragmentation, using the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. No piece is inherently “bad,” but if you put them in the wrong place, they will damage each other, and create a picture that is distorted and ugly. And we said that teshuvah is really about putting all the pieces in the right place. Only now we see that the puzzle keeps getting bigger and bigger -- more and more complex, with ever more pieces. But however grand the scale, the work of unification is the same.

And that raises a challenge. Because even when we understand this notion of radical oneness, at some point, almost all of us, consciously or unconsciously, will put up a boundary. Yeah, ok, I’m with you; everything is one. Except. Except that person or group, that behavior, that feeling, that idea. That’s over the line, that’s “other,” there’s no place for that. It’s not hard to come up with examples. I suspect almost everyone here has already done so.

It’s precisely at that boundary -- where it gets really hard -- that it’s actually the most important. That’s where the real work of teshuvah is. The highest expression of teshuvah is integrating into the oneness even those things that seem entirely other -- destructive, negative, hateful, evil -- within, and without. This is both the path to and vision of redemption. If we really get this, tekiyah gedolah.

It’s not that there’s no evil. By striving to see everything as part of a larger oneness, we’re not saying it’s all just fine. Not at all. Kook’s notion of radical oneness acknowledges sin and evil, but understands evil, and its purpose, differently.

Yesterday we used the metaphor of a prism, which reveals all the separate colors contained in the oneness of the light. We might also think of a wave. A wave both exists and doesn’t. It exists -- we can surf it, it can knock us off our feet. But it is always part of the oneness of the sea -- at one and the same time distinctive and indistinguishable. In 1865 the ocean of Oneness crested into a wave named Abraham Isaac Kook; in 1935 the wave returned to the ocean. That’s what we individuals are. And we said that that particularization is necessary. It’s necessary both to express -- make real -- everything that exists within the one; and it’s necessary to refine and perfect everything that exists within the one.

But it’s also dicey. As things are particularized, they are taken out of context, thrown out of balance, distorted. Yes, when you hold glass to light it can reveal beautiful colors; it can also start a fire which ravages an entire forest. The essential oneness and character of the light is always the same. Everything depends on how it is refracted, expressed in particular contexts -- as a rainbow, a fire, laser surgery, or a nuclear disaster. The wave can make for great surfing, or a tsunami. That’s why the shevarim -- the sound of particularization -- is a weeping sound. There’s pain in particularization.

So yes, everything has a place, some kernel of goodness; everything is an expression of oneness. But not every expression of that oneness is positive:

The most destructive thoughts are the unripe forms of the most exalted thoughts, but they reach us without their full development, that is, they do not come with an indication of their significance or of the circumstances for their application.¹²

The great challenge is discernment: figuring out which expressions of the oneness are truer, higher, and which have been corrupted.

12. Ma’amore Ha-Rayah, p. 40 (Essential Writings, p. 203)

I'll give you a couple of examples.

Single issue voting. Single issue voting comes from a noble root, from a passion for something that seems uncompromisable, of paramount importance -- e.g., the existence and security of Israel, the ability to feed one's family. But when that holy ideal is seen as standing alone, on its face that's a prime example of fragmentation; it's a failure to see that issue as part of an integrated whole. If you really think about it, single issue voting is an absurdity, an obvious distortion. No issue stands alone. That's why it always leads to fragmentation, and why single issue voting is never a path to healing anything. That's why it's dangerous.

Another example: religious fundamentalism generally, and its presence in the political sphere. This too is rooted in teshuvah -- a longing for unity, for the moral elevation of society. But it's unripe. It's a distorted, and therefore negative expression of exalted ideas. Religious fundamentalism (of any religion, including Judaism) is an impulse for unity that hasn't gone through the refinement of the teshuvah process; it hasn't really come to terms with the multiplicity within oneness. It's like staying with that first tekiyah, and not entering into the particularism of the shevarim and teruot. It hasn't confronted and refined its lack of understanding and fear of the other. It's stuck in narrow, literalist thinking of the Bible, and of life. It hasn't done the work necessary to attain "higher comprehensiveness." It's an attempt to unify by narrowing and excluding, rather than by expanding. It's a false unity, based on coercion, and the denial of conflicting truths. That's why it always leads to fragmentation. That's why it's so dangerous.

In fact, Rav Kook was very clear that as one ascends in teshuvah, one becomes increasingly tolerant, multi-cultural, pluralistic, and universalist. To the extent that is lacking -- in an individual, in a religion (including Judaism) or in a society (including the United States and Israel), to that same extent is there distortion, fragmentation, and the need for further teshuvah.

Destruction and evil are nothing more than the absence of teshuvah: the failure to restore something to its root, return it to its proper context, integrate it within the larger whole. The failure to expand one's consciousness. Or to put it more bluntly, not power or the love of money, but narrowness is the root of all evil. That's the cardinal sin: narrow feeling (a constricted heart), and narrow thinking.

And this failure to do teshuvah -- the failure to strive for higher comprehensiveness -- *is the root cause of why we are in such a mess today*. Whether we're talking about the economy, the breakdown in the American political system, difficulties in Israel (both external and internal), the environment, excessive greed and self-interest, polarization and vitriol, or the simple lack of common civility. Whether we're talking about radical Islam, interreligious and intra-religious discord of all kinds -- including discord within the Jewish community. All of this behavior results from the failure to realize (both in thought and action - but primarily thought, because everything flows from there) authentic oneness -- all of it is caused by fragmentation. It's an auto-immune disease, in which we attack as "other" what is really part of the self, leading to ever more fragmentation.

And the only path to healing is teshuvah -- developing an ever expanding consciousness, "higher comprehensiveness" -- which is able to see both the distortion *and* the root of holiness, its place within the oneness, at the same time. So that we see the hatred and violence against Israel as the distortion, the evil, that it is, *and* we see the holy root of a people striving for independence and dignity. So that we see our own yearning for a secure and prosperous State

of Israel as the holy impulse that it is, *and* we see the way in which that holiness is sometimes distorted by base nationalism and fear.

But why does it matter how we see it? Here's why. Unification, harmonization, is not always possible in the realm of action. Needs conflict. Choices must be made. Evil must be contained and stopped. But unification is *always* possible in the realm of thought. And if our thought, our consciousness, is always seeking that unity -- always aspiring -- as a discipline, it *will* shape our actions. It will shape our day to day interactions with each other, how we earn our money, how we spend our money, who we choose as leaders (political and religious) and what we urge them to do. Consciousness *is* the source of the reality around us. It's one reason why Kook says that thoughts of teshuvah *are* teshuvah. When our thoughts aspire toward oneness, everything follows. When we think in narrow, divisive ways, everything follows. Not in a superficial, wishful-thinking immediate cause-and-effect way, but over time, as a discipline, slowly.

Moreover, as we said, personal private teshuvah, and national public teshuvah are one essence -- one aspirational breath flowing through the shofar, getting wider and wider. That means we're not just small individual beings who "make a difference" (for good or bad) in or on a society "out there." We *are* the "out there." And the "out there" -- society and existence as a whole -- *is* us. It's all one. As Kook says, "[T]here is a fundamental integration between the *nishmatit* (soul-quality) that operates in the world and our own *nishmatit*."¹³ We human beings are part and parcel of this giant organism called creation, but we have a special role. Because we have moral consciousness and freewill, we have a stronger and more direct influence on everything. We're like the brain in the existential body.

Which is to say, we are enormously powerful -- and therefore responsible:

How wonderful is the moral perspective that arises from this great responsibility -- a responsibility for all existence, for all worlds. We have the power to bring favor and light, life, joy, and honor in these worlds . . . Yet it is also in our power to bring pain to every good portion . . .¹⁴

Our private teshuvah is not a self-indulgence. It's a public good.

Soon we will pray the Unetanneh Tokef, with those hopeful yet challenging words:

וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתִתְפַּלֵּה וְצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רָע הַגְּזֵרָה.

Teshuvah tefillah and tzedakah have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.

It's not about an anthropomorphized God who might "reduce our sentence" for good behavior. Rather, says Kook, as a person does teshuvah:

The realization grows in the person so that by cultivating good deeds, good thoughts, and good speech, one thereby makes *all* existence more agreeable, one strengthens humankind and raises it toward the heavens . . .

13. Orot HaKodesh, II p. 351.

14. Orot HaKodesh, III, p. 63, quoted in Silver from the Land of Israel: A New Light on the Sabbath and Holidays from the Writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (Chanan Morrison), p. 79.

All people become better in the privacy of their hearts through the improvement toward a higher way of life of one of them. The grief of many depressed people becomes mitigated, and is touched with some comfort, when one soul is stirred forcefully by divine comfort. Even wild beasts and all destructive creatures become more gentle. Their poison is softened somewhat through the gentle swaying of a soul that rejoices in Adonai.¹⁵

Or as he says elsewhere, "One spark of the divine light that shines in any one heart can overcome endless centers of darkness."¹⁶

So we need heroes like Rav Kook. An Orthodox ḥasid, the Chief Rabbi, who when he heard about the secular Zionists doing construction work on Rosh Hashanah, in Jerusalem, in violation of every principle of sanctity and Torah -- would go and blow the shofar for them, rather than condemn them. It doesn't always work -- not everyone who hears the shofar breaks down in tears and comes to shul. Kook himself wrote about timing. The world is not ready for faith-based politics; it's an idea that isn't ripe, and is therefore destructive in practice. Nor are we ready for one universal religion; there's still too much refinement to be done that can only be accomplished by individual, distinctive religions. And sometimes the moment demands doing what we need to do to stop destructive behavior, and contain the impact of evil.

But ultimately fragmentation cannot be healed by fragmentation. It can only be healed through unification -- by heroes who have themselves developed the ability to see with higher comprehensiveness, and who can therefore discern in all this mess some root of holiness, albeit distorted, and respond accordingly. We need to be those heroes.

No human being, no society, is capable of realizing -- realizing in the sense of "making real", embodying, or even realizing in thought -- the holy oneness in a complete and undistorted way. We all have work to do. That's why Kook said that teshuvah is a mitzvah that is on the one hand very easy, because it can be done even in thought, and on the other hand "has never yet been effectuated fully in the world and in life." At the same time, "all the hopes of the individual and of society depend on it."

15. Igrot HaKodesh III, pp. 314-15 (Essential Writings, p. 188)

16. Arpele Tohar, p. 25 (Essential Writings, p. 207)

PART TWO: YOM KIPPUR

Teaching 4 (Kol Nidre): Sensitivity

“How wrongdoing dulls the intelligence, both the intelligence of the individual and the intelligence of society, of a generation and of an epoch!”¹⁷

Thus writes Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the inspiration for our learning this year, in his monumental work, *Orot HaTeshuvah*, “The Lights of Teshuvah.” As we learned on Rosh Hashanah, Rav Kook was a towering figure -- a scholar, practicing Kabbalist and mystic, Zionist, nation-builder, visionary. Born in 1865, he served as Chief Rabbi of the pre-state Land of Israel, for 14 years, until his death in 1935. And we are turning to his teachings because I believe that he offers a vision of Judaism (especially but not only his ideas about teshuvah) and a model of leadership that can provide a great hope for us in these times.

On Rosh Hashanah we spoke about the general nature of teshuvah (personal teshuvah and national teshuvah) as a process of unification, characterized by expansion. An ever-expanding sense of oneness. And an ever-expanding context or theater of repair, from the individual personal teshuvah we do, outward to the repair and transformation of society -- all existence -- as a whole.

Now, on Yom Kippur, we need to get more specific. Today we recite the *vidui*, confession. We focus on specific actions, failures to act, words we shouldn't have spoken, or should have spoken, character traits and ways of being in the world. And we're supposed to make amends: to apologize to those we've hurt, to fix whatever we've damaged. And it turns out that one of the main things we've damaged, that needs repair, is ourselves.

“How wrongdoing dulls the intelligence!”

The translation here is “intelligence,” but it's broader than that. The Hebrew is *da'at*, meaning consciousness, awareness. Wrongdoing (of any kind) dulls our consciousness -- our whole inner life -- in its entirety. It makes us less sensitive. And if there is any particular aspect of teshuvah that seems to me to be most necessary now, it would be recultivating sensitivity.

Kook speaks very often of “sensitive souls.” What does he mean?

First, what are we *not* talking about? Kook himself notes a number of qualities, or ways of being, which can outwardly *resemble* but are not the sensitivity he's talking about: depression, cowardice, weakness, sentimentality, over-scrupulousness, timidity. Nor are we talking about self-absorption, such that we take everything personally and are easily offended.

What we're talking about is a highly refined and elevated receptivity, attunement; a finely developed discernment able to detect and evaluate nuance. It comes in many forms.

There's intellectual sensitivity: the ability to discern truth from falsehood, and to make fine distinctions between similar but subtly different ideas and circumstances; the “higher

17. *Orot HaTeshuvah* 10:5, in *Abraham Isaac Kook -- The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters and Poems*, tr. and ed. by Ben Zion Bokser (Paulist Press: 1978) (hereafter “Kook”), pp. 75-76.

comprehensiveness” as we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah; the ability to activate our rational capacity even in the face of emotion, and to understand things even if we may not agree with them.

There’s interpersonal/emotional sensitivity: an awareness of the needs, feelings, and experiences of other peoples, not just in broad strokes but in a penetrating, nuanced way, connected to each person’s experience as unique.

There’s moral/ethical sensitivity: a finely honed sense of right and wrong, able to discern what the particular moment demands of us; the ability to tease out and balance competing moral demands.

There’s aesthetic sensitivity -- a refined sense of the beautiful, the harmonious, the elevating.

Although we need to develop sensitivity generally, because increasing or dulling our sensitivity in one area can increase or dull our sensitivity in others, today I want to focus on one kind of sensitivity in particular: spiritual sensitivity.

Spiritual sensitivity draws on and integrates all these other sensitivities, and goes beyond them. It involves a heightened awareness and knowledge of the recesses of the self, and the way the self both affects and is affected by everything we encounter -- nature, other people, time, ideas. It’s an awareness of complexity and nuance in *being*; a textured, layered encounter with the world, taking into account multiple levels of existence and meaning. It’s a consciousness of and responsiveness to the concealed as well as the revealed. Unlike the proverbial *insensitive* fools, who rush in where angels fear to tread, the spiritually sensitive are always aware that there is more going on than they are able to sense. Including within the self. Spiritual sensitivity is a sensitivity to the claims and needs of the soul -- one’s own soul, and the world soul. It’s the awareness of Oneness, of the interconnectedness we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah.

And most especially, spiritual sensitivity involves sensing always the need for teshuvah -- the yearning for all existence to be better, purer, more vigorous, on a higher level, the natural fear of sin -- which is always present in the heart. It’s about sensing the river of teshuvah that is always flowing, the Divine voice that is always speaking.¹⁸

I’ll give you a couple of examples.

The aesthetically sensitive person may be particularly aware and appreciative of the dapple of light in a forest at sunrise or sunset. The scientifically sensitive person may see and marvel at

18. See, e.g., Orot HaKodesh I, pp. 176, in *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, tr. and ed. by Ben Zion Bokser (Ben Yehuda Press: 2006) (hereafter “Essential Writings”), p. 154:

We listen to the holy voice that speaks to us from on high. We absorb the impressions registered, that sparkle like lightning from the higher domain of the soul and the source of its being. Every vision that is revealed is a voice from on high that is calling to us. It comes from the source of knowledge, from the treasury of life that abides the soul of the One who is the life of the universe. It reveals itself to each person, according to the levels of his/her self-refinement. As the sins which alienate the person from his Creator, the Creator of all existence, are removed, the voice from the realm where all is embraced in a higher unity reaches us with a greater disclosure of truth.

all the varieties of foliage, a particularly rare species of bird. The spiritually sensitive person will also be aware of a presence, and will perhaps feel the need to say a blessing, to pray, to respond.

Or, someone who commits a transgression may be morally sensitive enough to realize that it's wrong, and may well fear punishment. He or she may be socially sensitive enough to be aware of the harm to caused to another, to empathize with the person one wronged, and feel bad about it. The person who is spiritually sensitive will also feel something else: a disconnect with one's own self, a sense of not being at peace, an inner anxiety. The spiritually sensitive person will know that even if there are no external consequences -- even if it was a victimless offense and there will be no punishment -- there are nevertheless consequences in the soul, and will feel the need for teshuvah

Now, if teshuvah is implanted within us, why don't more of us feel it more? Why aren't we more spiritually sensitive?

Primarily, it's because of our own behavior.

How wrongdoing dulls the intelligence . . . When degeneration leads us to embrace an outlook on life that negates our higher vision, then we become prey to the dark side within us, to our weaker self.¹⁹

Bad behavior, in and of itself, dulls our spiritual sensitivity.

When we're dishonest in business or in our personal relationships, when we cheat on our taxes, or illegally copy software. When we're unkind, disrespectful. When we gossip. When we don't treat or pay our workers well, when we're disloyal to our employers. Everything in those *al het*s, and more. With every step, we dull our consciousness, we blunt our sensitivity.

Or maybe it's not specific actions, but character traits. Being quick to anger, slow to forgive. Cultivating self-pity, resentment or envy instead of gratitude. Being indiscreet, undisciplined. Whatever your particular issue is. That too, dulls our spiritual sensitivity.

And, our sensitivities become dulled when we are, as Rav Kook puts it, "driven by the coarser aspects of nature and by bad habits surrounding" us. When we watch inanity, violence or degradation as entertainment. When we over-indulge in food or drink.

How wrongdoing dulls our consciousness! Actions shape the soul, they open or close the channels of communication between our conscious awareness, and the often undisclosed needs of the soul.

And, we lack spiritual sensitivity (as individuals and as a society) for another reason: we've failed to cultivate it.

Sometimes we avoid the challenge of becoming spiritually sensitive by telling ourselves that it's something that either comes naturally or doesn't. And it's true that some people are naturally more spiritually sensitive than others. But in a sense, it's no different from developing an ear for music, or sensitizing one's palate to the subtleties of wine; one has to train oneself, by both acquiring a body of knowledge, and by practice.

19. Orot HaTeshuvah 10:5 (Kook, pp. 75-76).

Sometimes we fail to develop our spiritual sensitivity because it's crowded out, or dulled, by an overdeveloped sensitivity in another area. Some of us are so sensitive to one area (e.g., the needs of our bodies, or our emotional needs, for love and approval) that all other input is essentially blocked, whether it be the needs of others, or the needs of other parts of ourselves, such as our souls. We can become monofocused. For example, one barrier to spiritual sensitivity is an over-developed sensitivity to reason and intellectual consistency, an over-reliance on the intellect and the five senses as adequate to experience all that is worth experiencing. Most of the essential things in life require a different kind of sensitivity.

Moreover, without attention, the spirit will naturally become dull over time. We have to actively resist the entropy of the soul. We need daily spiritual exercise, and we need particular times like these High Holy Days to focus more intensely not only on atonement, but on attunement.

Now we've been talking primarily about losing our spiritual sensitivity as individuals, but of course, it applies at every level: "How wrongdoing dulls the intelligence . . . of society, of a generation and of an epoch!"

Some of us lament, often somewhat in jest, that our country, our world, is becoming stupider. It's no joke. We see it everywhere. And it's not just an intellectual decline. Our *consciousness* -- our sensitivity generally -- is increasingly dull.

Sensitivity grows through thoughtfulness, reflection, quiet; we reward decisiveness, action, verbosity. Sensitivity requires time; we value speed. We are nearly devoid of nuance in speech and thought, and increasingly in action. And most worrisome, we not only fail to nurture sensitivity, we now deride and attack it. It makes me want to weep when I hear the word "elite" used as an accusation. Somehow we've managed to turn intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual refinement and growth into a negative, elevating instead ignorance, coarseness and laziness. And so we are left with only the crudest clubs and pickaxes to hack away at complex problems that demand delicate laser surgery to repair.

"How wrongdoing dulls the intelligence . . . of society, of a generation and of an epoch!"

And as we might expect, whether we're talking about an individual or a society, it's a cycle that feeds on itself. Once we've become somewhat insensitive we're less attuned to the spiritual pain that would spur us to become more sensitive. Either we don't feel it at all, or we misdiagnose it. It's true of individuals. Sometimes (not always) what we experience as physical or psychological pain is actually spiritual pain. We may feel restless, anxious, empty, unfulfilled -- and never realize that we are suffering from a spiritual malady. And it's true of societies. Why is there so much anger in our world? "It's the economy." "It's the threat of terrorism." Maybe. But there are also deeper causes of our anger and fear, spiritual issues to which we are utterly insensitive.

Why, for example, *is* the economy so bad? Primarily because as a society our moral and spiritual sensitivities have become dull. We are simply no longer aware of the moral and spiritual implications of how we earn and spend money. We feel *economic* pain when our portfolios go down. But as long as they're going up, we don't feel spiritual pain. Even if the increase in our wealth comes through the exploitation of others. Even if we're profiting from policies that continue to widen the gap between rich and poor -- those who have opportunity and those who really, *really* don't -- as our society becomes more and more inequitable. We may have sympathy for those who have less than we do. We may even feel *their* pain. But we don't

feel the damage to our own souls. We don't sense the way that our participation in systemic injustice dulls us.

So how can we become more spiritually sensitive? Some of the training in spiritual sensitivity isn't overtly "religious" at all. The arts can help us develop spiritual sensitivity. Simply working at being kinder is a good step. So is sharpening our mind and intellectual sensitivity generally: being discerning and disciplined in participating in the political process and discourse, e.g., and not slipping into the laziness (Kook calls it a form of enslavement) of simply holding onto whatever beliefs and opinions we've held in the past. Engaging in meaningful discussion rather than small-talk. Slowing down. Practicing becoming more aware of one's self, and reflecting on the implications of our own experience (how often does the Torah enjoin us to remember that we were slaves in Egypt, and to learn from that experience!).

Sensitivity develops with emotional and intellectual maturity: quieting the mind, our fears and anxieties, our sense of entitlement, our desires and needs; bracketing all that and being in a receptive, responsive mode.

And of course, the primary path to spiritual sensitivity involves focusing specifically on the needs of the soul. Any act of holiness sensitizes our whole being. Every mitzvah, whether ritual or ethical, increases our spiritual sensitivity. As does prayer. And Torah study. Inadequate learning, ignorance of our tradition is one of the major causes of spiritual dullness within the Jewish community. Torah study sensitizes the spirit in two ways. One is the content: I am continually amazed and awed at the extraordinarily nuanced and refined sensitivity of both the Torah itself and the interpretive tradition based on it! The other is the process. Studying Torah is all about developing a fine sensitivity to the nuances of the text; and becoming more sensitive readers of text is excellent training for becoming more sensitive readers of the self, other people and life.

And of course, through teshuvah: atoning for what we've done, changing our behavior and character in the future, through all the things we've been talking about.

Most of all, though, to resensitize our souls and our society, we need courage. Even apart from our wrongdoing, and from our passive failure to develop our spiritual sensitivity, sometimes -- consciously or unconsciously -- we choose to become dull. Why? Because being sensitive is hard. It *is* countercultural -- which means it's sometimes lonely. And can make us feel vulnerable.

And it's a demanding way to live. When we're spiritually sensitive, we're aware of -- and empathic with -- far more pain in other people and in the world. And sometimes that awareness creates dilemmas and challenges. Being spiritually sensitive demands a very delicate balance between being open and having boundaries, between the needs of other and our own needs. If we allow ourselves to be sensitive to *everything*, we're likely become overwhelmed (both physically and emotionally) and just shut-down. That's why spiritual sensitivity isn't only about becoming more sensitive to others; it's essence is becoming more sensitive to one's self, especially the needs of the soul. The soul needs both to give and to receive; it needs to nurture and be nurtured.

And sometimes we dull ourselves because being sensitive involves living with more complexity and nuance than we really want to handle. It's hard work. Or because we fear that if we become more sensitive to the needs of our souls, we may discover that we need to make major changes in our lives, sometimes involving sacrifice.

Moreover, it's not necessarily true that the closer we get to our true selves, the more at peace we will be -- at least not initially. We know this from other areas of healing. When we move toward physical health, whether through changing diet or other medical care, or when we move toward psychological health by entering therapy, sometimes we feel worse before we feel better. Teshuvah -- increasing our spiritual sensitivity -- is no different:

When a person entertains the thought of teshuvah and of mending his actions and feelings, even if it is only in thought, he must not be disturbed because he feels agitated over his many sins, of which he has now become more conscious. This is the nature of this phenomenon. As long as a person is being driven by the coarser aspects of nature and by bad habits surrounding him, he is not so sensitive to his sins. Sometimes he feels nothing, and he sees himself as a righteous person. But once his moral sense is awakened, the light of the soul becomes at once manifest, and by that light his whole self becomes subjected to probing and he sees its defects. Then he becomes agitated with a deep sense of anxiety because of his low state of perfection and his grave deterioration. . . .²⁰

So if it's so hard to be spiritually sensitive, why do it? First, because it's necessary for repair. Thank God for that pain! Spiritual pain is a sign of a healthy, functioning spiritual immune system, like a fever, that warns us that the body needs healing. A spiritually sensitive person welcomes spiritual pain as an impetus to further teshuvah, further healing; as a sign of something that needs to be addressed.

And -- all levels of teshuvah depend -- both for their initiation and their success -- upon sensitivity. Whether we're talking about the detailed work of improving our character, our actions, or the higher teshuvah of elevating our consciousness and connecting with the Oneness. All of it is dependent on our becoming more sensitive instruments -- more attuned, more aware, more responsive.

That's what we're here for. And I don't mean here today, in synagogue. I mean, that's what we're *here* for.

Which is why ultimately it's the path to real joy, even if it's not always fun or easy. When our sensitivities are dulled, we miss out on much of the magnificence in life. Increasing our sensitivity opens for us realms and realms of joy.

And not only joy. Spiritual sensitivity is intertwined with vitality; it's actually the source of our vitality. Dullness is a kind of deadness. And we are always somewhere in the middle: neither wholly dull nor fully alive.

Over and over on these Yamim Noraim we pray for life. This is what we mean. Not to live longer -- although of course we want that too - but to be more fully alive.

"How wrongdoing dulls, deadens, our consciousness." May our teshuvah awaken us to life once again.

20. Orot HaTeshuvah 8:16 (Kook, p. 68).

Teaching 5 (Yom Kippur Day): The Bark and the Fruit

We are focused these days on teshuvah: repair, return, repentance. And today, Yom Kippur, is supposed to be the culmination of it all. The holiest day of the year. We've done all the work of teshuvah, and now we're ready for atonement. The slate is wiped clean.

What about all the things we haven't repaired?

Maybe repair is impossible. The person we've hurt has died, and the opportunity to make amends is gone. We want to forgive someone and repair the relationship, but their behavior hasn't -- and won't - change. Perhaps someone was physically injured due to our negligence, or we've engaged in gossip and damaged someone's reputation, and we can't undo the harm. We've gotten ourselves into a situation we know is wrong, and for whatever reason it's not possible to extricate ourselves.

Or maybe repair is theoretically possible, but not for us. We simply do not have the courage to confront someone we've hurt, or risk being hurt again by trying to repair a relationship. No matter how hard we try to alter a particular personality trait or way of being, we just can't seem to do it. Or we have to admit to ourselves that there are things we just can't bring ourselves to work that hard at changing. We lack the will.

And we've spoken also of public or national teshuvah. What about large-scale public conflicts and difficulties that seem intractable? The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians being a prime example.

Here's what Rav Kook says:

A person should not be disturbed by impediments in meeting the claims of teshuvah. Even if his difficulties stem from offenses against other persons, and he knows he has not redressed the wrongs and he finds himself too weak to mend his relations with his fellowman, let him not entertain in his heart any discouraging thoughts that disparage the value of teshuvah.²¹

Really? Of what value is our teshuvah if it doesn't change anything, if it doesn't yield results?

There's a little midrash about the creation of the world, found in Genesis Rabbah (5:9), a midrash collection dating from the 4th to 6th century, which provides a key to Rav Kook's thinking on this. According to this midrash, when God created the world, God's original "intent" in creating fruit trees was that the whole tree would be edible; the bark would be just like the fruit.

Obviously, that didn't happen. So why would the authors of the midrash even imagine it?

On the surface, it's solving a textual problem. Adam and Eve and the snake weren't the only ones punished in the Garden of Eden: the Torah says that the earth was punished too. What did the earth do wrong? This. The earth as it were "disobeyed" God's command, and didn't make the tree as delicious and nourishing as the fruit.

21. Orot HaTeshuvah 13:10 (Kook, p. 95).

But Rav Kook reads it in a much more profound way. The fruit, he writes, represents goals, end results, achievement. The tree represents the process of producing those results, the path to getting there. And he reads the midrash as saying that God's original "intent" was that both process and goal would be equally delightful, delicious, and nourishing, equally valued. But somehow, in the reality as we live it, the bark and branches (the process) become coarse matter, they lose their taste. And only the fruit, the achievement of the goal, tastes sweet on our tongues.

The bark is supposed to taste the same as the fruit; the process is as important as the result. This is another one of those things that we say (albeit in different language), but don't really live. Of course there are times when the process is what value or enjoy. But mostly, we are a very "results oriented" society. We give lip service to the importance of process, that it's the effort that counts -- usually when we or someone we love hasn't succeeded. But at heart, we really value actual achievement.

It's understandable. There's a natural human tendency to value more highly that which can be measured and quantified; so we're predisposed to value concrete results over amorphous processes. And results really *do* seem more attractive.

Is this such a problem? Actually, yes.

Some of the negative consequences are pretty obvious. At the most extreme, it leads to "the ends justify the means." We know how dangerous that mindset can be. We can then engage in all kinds of immoral behavior, as long as the goal itself -- the fruit -- is appropriate and permissible.

But even apart from overtly immoral behavior, when we value the fruit and not the process of producing it, we end up pretty unhappy. Fruit is delicious and nourishing. But it has the unfortunate disadvantage of being slow to ripen, vulnerable to changing climates, easily bruised, and quick to rot. Achieving a goal feels great -- for a few minutes. So if we only delight in the fruit -- in the attainment of our goals -- we're in for a lot of disappointment, loss, resentment. And we'll miss out on an awful lot along the way.

Maybe that's why there's a special *halakhah* (Jewish law) regarding fruit trees. For the first three years that a tree bears fruit, we're not allowed to eat any of it. It's partly a reminder that we don't create alone, but always in partnership with God; so we consider the first fruits of any creative process as belonging to God. But I wonder also if it's a kind of *tikkun*, a repair, of the split between the bark and the fruit. A reminder to us to cultivate joy in process, not only in the achievement of the goal.

Because when we don't do that, we not only end up unhappy, but significantly dysfunctional. The more we value and appreciate only the fruit/results to the exclusion of the process, the more impatient we become. We lose our tolerance for longer, slower processes. (Think how obsessed we are with increasing the "processing speed" of our computers!) And then it's very hard to sustain those processes which don't yield immediate fruit (when we can't just upgrade to a faster cpu). Which are, of course, pretty much all the worthwhile ones -- both personally, and nationally (the peace process being a prime example). Most things that are really worth achieving come only through hard work over the long haul. As the Talmud teaches us, "if someone says I have not labored and I have found, do not believe him."

Nor does appreciating process mean over-romanticizing it; the bark is indeed coarse, sometimes inedible. Rather, it means finding joy in it when we can, and developing the patience and discipline to stay the course when we can't.

Now, for all these reasons -- and more -- nowhere is results-oriented thinking more devastating than in the life of the spirit.

Ideally, all the actions supportive of spiritual growth -- prayer, Torah study, ritual observance, ethical observance, teshuvah -- would "taste" as good as the fruit. Sometimes, they don't. Of course we should do everything we can to make Jewish life beautiful, fulfilling, inspiring. We have a notion of *hiddur mitzvah*, beautifying the mitzvah. We try to make it "tasty." And it's certainly true that one of the reasons for the decline in synagogue affiliation and participation is that many expressions of Judaism feel like dead wood.

But that's not the only reason. It's also true that we approach our spiritual life, our Judaism, with the same results-oriented impatience that we bring to other endeavors. Valuing only the fruit, we want quick and easy spirituality that will always taste delicious, and nourish us immediately. Fewer and fewer of us have the patience for the long-term process that genuine spirituality is.

Mature, authentic religion isn't always yummy. And results don't always come -- not in our secular lives, and not in the life of the spirit. There isn't always a "bang for the buck" in Torah study, prayer, observance, even ethical deeds. Sometimes doing a mitzvah (visiting the sick, comforting mourners, kashering the house for Passover) just feels exhausting or burdensome. Our prayer services are lengthy not only because we have to cover a lot of liturgy; we have a lot of liturgy because the process of really praying -- of making a connection -- takes time. And if we want our study of Torah to yield it's richest fruit, there is no shortcut around the difficult work of learning some Hebrew. It's a lot of hard work, and it doesn't always yield inspiration, elevation, good feeling.

But "results oriented" thinking is devastating to the life of the spirit for an even deeper reason: because it is fundamentally based on falsehood. The problem isn't only that we value the result over the process. The problem is that we imagine they can be separated, disconnected from each other.

Results-oriented thinking is based on an illusion that the results can somehow be measured, valued apart from the process that led to those results; that results can even exist separate from the process. It's a failure to recognize that the fruit is part and parcel of the tree. It's an expression of fragmented thinking, and therefore always leads to further fragmentation and harm.

This is the real power of the midrash, and of Rav Kook's reading of it. What does the midrash mean in saying that God's "intent" was that the tree would be just like the fruit, but that earth "disobeyed" God? It's a way of saying that any worthwhile goal, and the process of getting there -- "all the supportive actions that sustain it" -- are actually of one essence. They are inherently -- from a God's-eye view -- one. But something in the work of creation -- in the particularization and actualization of the world -- resulted in a disruption in the relationship between the fruit and the tree.

Remember we said on Rosh Hashanah that creation is a process of teasing out, separating, making visible all the particularities inherent in the oneness of God. We used the metaphor of holding a prism up to light, to reveal all the particular colors that exist in potential within the

oneness of the light. We said that that process of separation is necessary but dicey -- things get out of context, distorted. And we understood teshuvah to be about ever-expanding unification; healing of fragmentation, putting the jigsaw puzzle pieces back where they belong.

This is a specific example of that. One of the things that is fragmented, and in need of healing, is the difference between the fruit and the tree that produced it. The separation of process and result.

On one level, the difference between the bark and the fruit is real. "The earth disobeyed." In this world, the bark really isn't delicious, it isn't edible. But when the midrash says that God's "intent" was otherwise, it's saying that this split -- however real -- is not inevitable. Or at least, it's not irreparable. It's a reality that we are called upon to try to heal. Paradoxically, the separation of process from goal is *both* an external reality, *and*, it's caused by our own consciousness. *We* separate the process from the goal. *We* value only the fruit, the end result; we see them as unrelated. It's a symptom of our own fragmentation, of a need for teshuvah.

And this is the main reason why results-oriented thinking is entirely incompatible with the life of the soul.

Of course there are practical issues. To go back where we began, in situations where repair isn't possible, if we care only for the fruit, we may not engage in the process of teshuvah at all. Why bother? Or if we do begin, we'll be quickly discouraged:

But the issue is much deeper than that. The soul's origin is Oneness; it's a spark of the Divine. It belongs, is most at home, in the realm of God's original "intent" -- where the bark is as delicious as the fruit. It craves unity. And therefore, all spiritual work is characterized by what we call in traditional Jewish thought: *lishma*, "for its own sake." In the rabbinic mind, the highest level of doing anything is doing it *lishma*.

It's good to study Torah in order to become knowledgeable about our tradition, to refine our sensibilities and behavior, to stretch our intellects; doing it *lishma* is a higher level. Nevertheless, we're taught, it's okay to study Torah *shelo lishma* (not for its own sake), because it leads to studying *lishma*. Do it for some reason, because eventually you'll come to do it for no reason. It's such an alien concept to our results oriented modern ears, conditioned as we are to valuing only the bottom line!

Similarly, it's good to engage in prayer in order to be inspired, to be centered, to refine our thoughts, to feel a connection; doing it *lishma* is a higher level. It's good to give *zedakah*, to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, out of a feeling of compassion, to help another person; but it's a higher level to do it *lishma* -- for the sake of the mitzvah itself. It's true of all religious acts.

And it's especially true of teshuvah. When it comes to transformation, healing, repair, the process *is* the goal, it *is* the fruit. The process of teshuvah -- the work of repair -- has inherent value in and of itself, whether or not we are "successful" in any measurable sense. We do teshuvah *lishma* -- for its own sake. And when we miss this -- when we approach the process of teshuvah in a results-oriented way -- we miss the whole thing.

And actually, that's really true of everything. The process is always the result. The tree is always the fruit.

More and more, we're learning that the process needs to be shaped and informed by the fruit we're trying to produce. That's why mission and vision statements are all the rage in organizational work.

But we still often don't take seriously that results *always* take on the character of the process that produced them. Always. In other words, saying "the ends justify the means" -- "okay, so, we might do some bad things to get there, but it's justified because it's in the service of a noble goal" -- is not only morally wrong. It's a fantasy. An ignoble process will never yield fully a noble result. Inevitably, the fruit will be bruised.

It's true in practical terms. When we're not attentive to healthy, ethical process, we end up with bad results. If we don't work toward a better electoral process, we will continue to elect poor leaders. If we don't heal our legislative processes, we will continue to have poor laws, or inadequate or delayed legislation.

And it's true from an existential, spiritual perspective. Flawed processes leave their marks -- always -- on the fruit they produce.

So what do we do with the fact that all processes are flawed? We don't live in God's idealized vision, where the trees and the fruit are one and the same. We live here on earth, where the bark is coarse and tasteless, where the practicalities of process don't match the ideals we strive to produce. To give a really stark example: should we not have created, or not defend, the State of Israel, because the process of doing so was and is inevitably flawed? Of course not.

But here are a few things we can do.

One thing we can do is make sure that we don't allow practicalities to *overshadow* ideals. When we devalue the significance of process, we become particularly susceptible to doing just that. It's not "the ends justify the means," exactly. "It's just that there are all kinds of practicalities in this world," we say to ourselves, "and if we want to achieve anything -- if there's to be any fruit at all -- we have to yield to them." And so we delude ourselves regarding the necessity or inevitability of all kinds of destructive behavior, telling ourselves that the world is as is. We simply accept the mistreatment of people as necessary to increase the bottom line. "Business is business" after all. Or we dismiss disingenuousness and obstructionism as a normal part of the political process. "That's politics." And all is fair in love and war.

On the one hand, yes. There is some inevitable conflict between the practicality and ideal. On the other hand, we need to say, no - a thousand times no. We should not simply accept the coarseness of the practical world as an inevitability. At every moment, we have the opportunity to do teshuvah -- "higher teshuvah," unification -- by insisting that the practical live up to the ideal, that the tree look and taste -- as much as possible -- like the fruit. Occupy Wall Street, it seems to me, is rooted in this. It is that "no," a refusal to simply accept that the inequities in our system are inevitable, albeit expressed in somewhat inchoate form.

So -- we do our best to elevate the practicalities, the process. And then we do teshuvah in another sense. Remembering that the fruit and the tree are one, that flawed processes leave their marks on the fruit they produce, we take responsibility and do the work of repair. Not because we shouldn't have proceeded. Not because someone else's pain necessarily means we were wrong. Sometimes when Isaac or Jacob steps forward to fulfill his destiny, his brother Yishmael or Esav is hurt. And sometimes two peoples have very legitimate claims to the same little piece of land. We do have to move forward. But we cannot simply rejoice in the fruit and

ignore the process. We have to be sensitive to the way in which the fruit has been bruised, distorted -- and is in need of teshuvah.

The process of living is fraught. No one goes through it without both suffering and inflicting harm. But we can take responsibility for the harm we cause, and work to heal it. We can do teshuvah. All the time.

Fortunately, the fantasy that the fruit can be completely separated from the tree -- the result from the process -- is not the only illusion we maintain. There's another one. "Of what value is our teshuvah if it doesn't change anything, if it doesn't yield results?" This too is a fantasy. As Rav Kook says, "let us not entertain in our hearts any discouraging thoughts that disparage the value of teshuvah." The process of teshuvah always yields results, because the process of teshuvah *is* the result. The result may not be measurable, quantifiable. We may not see a change out there. We may not even feel much change "in here."

But for as long as we are engaging in the work of teshuvah -- of repair and transformation -- we are fulfilling life's purpose. We're living life *lishma*.

Teaching 6 (Neilah): Ascent

We spoke this morning about the bark and the fruit: the need not only to value process as much as we value results, but to continue to strive to unify the process and result; wherever possible to raise the practical to the level of the ideal, and where it's not possible, to repair. And we said that when it comes to teshuvah -- to the work of transformation and repair -- the process *is* the goal, it *is* the fruit. Teshuvah has inherent value in and of itself, regardless of measurable or even perceptible results.

So what is the inherent value of teshuvah?

It has to do with the nature of our souls, the nature of our humanity. Way back on Rosh Hashanah we spoke about teshuvah as an aspirational desire or impulse, that is always present in the heart. In other words, *the soul has an inherent need and desire to ascend, to grow.*

Have you ever noticed that when we're growing and learning you can handle a lot more of what life throws at you? Illness is more bearable when we feel that we're ascending spiritually, or growing in some way -- certainly if we're able to learn *from* our suffering, but even if we're learning in spite of our suffering. Even if it's just acquiring a new skill. Grieving, any kind of emotional loss, transitions of all kinds, financial decline, being out of work -- all of it becomes more bearable (I'm not saying that it becomes okay, or that we don't feel pain -- but we *bear* it better) when the soul is moving forward at the same time. It's the secret to aging with joy: keep learning, keep growing deeper, and reaching higher.

There's a reason why we feel happiest and strongest when we're moving forward, upward. Teshuvah is the food of the soul. Aspiration, elevation, transformation, repair -- that is the sweetest nectar for the soul, it's nourishment. Our nourishment. And when we don't aspire -- when we starve our souls -- we suffer. Rav Kook refers to "the anguish felt by the soul because it has remained static, instead of meeting its need always to ascend toward higher levels."²² We may feel nameless anxiety, or boredom. We may feel depleted, lethargic, depressed, easily overwhelmed, without knowing why. We are suffering *non-growing* pains.

Earlier today we prayed the Unetanneh Tokef: וְתִשְׁוֶבָה וְתִתְפַּלֵּה וְצַדִּיקָה מֵעֲבִירֶיךָ אֶת רָע הַגְּזֵרָה ("Teshuvah tefillah and tzedakah have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny."). Now we have yet another way of understanding those words. Teshuvah (repair, repentance), tefillah (prayer) and tzedakah (giving) ameliorate the severity of the decree because they are all modes of aspiration. It's not simple hopefulness. "If I pray, maybe things will be different." "If I give tzedakah, I'll be rewarded." "If I do teshuvah, I won't be punished." It's about providing nourishment to the soul *even if our external situation stays the same*. It's about affirming that, no matter what, it is possible to ascend, and taking steps to do it.

Now, in thinking about the soul's yearning to ascend, we need to come back to something else we talked about on Rosh Hashanah. We spoke then about the way that holy impulses sometimes get expressed in distorted, negative ways -- out of context or proportion. And there's a dark side even to the soul's yearning to continually ascend and grow -- a distorted and negative expression of it. We call it perfectionism.

We might think that yearning to continually ascend, and striving for perfection, are basically the same thing. But the difference between them is all the difference in the world. One (teshuvah)

22. Orot HaTeshuvah 15:3 (Kook, p. 113).

is about the unity of process and result -- ascent for its own sake. The other (perfectionism) is a form of results-oriented thinking -- attaining a goal. And if teshuvah is the soul's sweetest nectar, perfectionism can be a kind of poison.

Rav Kook is very clear that aiming for perfection -- desiring nothing less than to be a tzaddik, completely righteous -- makes teshuvah extremely difficult, if not impossible.

One obvious reason why: it's intimidating. If we do teshuvah demanding perfection of ourselves -- not only in becoming completely righteous (which I suspect most of know is unrealistic), but in any aspect or step or component of teshuvah -- we'll get discouraged pretty quickly, or we may never start at all. For example: when we set out to work on a character trait (e.g., lovingkindness, or patience, or discipline), it's unrealistic to set our sights on fully *attaining* that quality: *being perfectly* loving or patient or disciplined.

Or: maybe we're trying to repair and atone for concrete harm we've done. If we wait for perfect atonement, we'll likely feel guilty forever. Instead, we do the best we can -- even if our efforts are hardly perfect -- *and then we let the guilt go*. We allow Yom Kippur to atone.

Or, maybe we've been deeply hurt, betrayed. We can't wait to be ready to forgive completely -- perfectly -- in order to start the process of forgiving. We may never be ready. So forgive now, as much as you can, however imperfectly.

Which takes us to another reason why perfectionism is anathema to teshuvah. It tends to make us harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving -- of ourselves and of others. When we spoke this morning about the bark becoming "coarse", we understood that to mean that process is often very hard work, not as enticing or appealing as the joy of seeing results, of accomplishment. But the bark is "coarse" in another way too: "works in progress" -- whether things or people -- are often themselves a little coarse. Growth isn't always elegant. There's that awkward stage, where we're a little rough and off-putting.

If we're working on being more direct and straightforward, we may at first be too blunt. If we're trying to do better at self-care and setting boundaries, we may slide for a time into selfishness. Efforts to be more empathic or kind may initially appear condescending or just a little sappy, or it may seem not fully genuine. Because it probably isn't -- yet. When we traverse new ground, sometimes we stumble.

So it's essential to effective teshuvah that we allow each other to be "works in progress," and that we forgive ourselves for being the all-too human works-in-progress that we are.

Because actually, a work in progress is what we're meant to be. Perfectionism is anathema to teshuvah because perfection, by its terms, would end the process of growth. It's static. The soul -- a human being -- needs constantly to ascend. We suffer when we're static, even if that stasis is perfection.

Now, having said all that (that perfectionism is the dark side of the soul's desire to ascend, that teshuvah is not about harsh judgment), that doesn't mean it's okay to be careless or lazy, inattentive to details. On the contrary. The higher the soul ascends -- the more spiritually sensitive we become -- the more we are attuned to the subtlest details of our character and behavior, and the better we understand that all those tiny details matter.

Similarly, recognizing perfectionism as the distortion it is, and learning to be forgiving of ourselves and others, doesn't mean we should become self-satisfied, or content with mediocrity. We're not called to perfection. We *are* called to continually work at repairing and elevating *all* things, and *all* parts of the self. Even the things that are already pretty good.

One of the common misconceptions about teshuvah is that it's focused primarily on our negative traits and behaviors. And that's important, but that view is itself an expression of fragmented and unbalanced thinking. Everything we've been talking about -- from "higher comprehensiveness" (the God's-eye view that sees all things as expressive of a larger oneness), to increasing our spiritual sensitivity, to unifying the bark and the fruit (the process and the result) and living *lishma* -- all of it leads us to realize that teshuvah is always focused on elevating, refining, healing *the whole* self. Rav Kook puts it this way:

Just as one must raise evil dispositions and thoughts to their original source in order to mend them and to moderate them, so is it necessary to raise low-level dispositions and thoughts to their original source and to illumine them with the light of greatness. Although the latter are good, they are not on a high enough level of goodness, and they do not offer enough illumination. And just as one serves the world by raising the degraded dispositions and thoughts, *even more* so does one serve and improve the condition of the world by raising the low-level dispositions and thoughts to a higher level. . . .²³

As we clear away negativity within us or caused by us -- as we atone for the real "sins" -- and we start to become again more spiritually sensitive, we begin to become more and more aware of the gap between the "pretty good," and the great. We begin to feel pain over that gap, and to yearn to bridge it.

This is actually teshuvah at its sweetest and most joyful. Our strengths start to pull us upward. I'll give you a couple of examples.

Maybe through honest self-assessment I know that I'm a caring, loving person. I pay shivah calls, visit the sick. I'm a good friend; I'm there for people in my community. As I do teshuvah -- healing negativity and fragmentation, sensitizing my soul -- I start to feel pulled to be more effective, more refined, in all that lovingkindness. Not that I necessarily need to do *more* -- but instead of asking a friend who is ill "do you need anything," I might specifically offer to do the laundry, or make dinner. Or I might feel able to -- want to -- listen differently, with more presence.

Or maybe one of my strengths is generosity. As I move toward ever-greater unification and sensitivity, I want to elevate my giving. Again, it may not mean giving *more*. But I may want my giving to be more targeted, more effective. Maybe I want to give not only financially, but I want to take an active interest in mentoring and advising, sharing more of myself, when I give. Maybe I want to be more creative and thoughtful about how I can do more with what I have to give.

Not because how I was before was bad -- it was good! -- and not because I'm judging myself harshly as deficient. But because it's exciting -- because the process of teshuvah is (in a good way) addictive. When the soul begins to be nourished by the growth and elevation it desires, it wants more. It's like being on a "spiritual roll", which builds on itself.

23. Orot HaTeshuvah 14:1 (Kook, p. 97-98).

Now, this delicate distinction between on the one hand, perfection and harsh judgment, and on the other hand, attending to the smallest detail and continuing to strive for improvement even of our strengths, is essential for yet another reason. It's the key to managing one of the inevitable hazards of a spiritual life: fear.

Kook wrote a great deal about fear and spiritual timidity. His intended audience, I believe, was primarily ultra-orthodox "black hat" Jews, *haredim* (literally, "those who tremble"). *Yirat shamayim* -- the awe and fear of God -- is a crucial part of mature spirituality. These are after all the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe; there should be some fear and trembling. And so too *yirat het* -- the fear of sin -- is an appropriate and necessary part of religious life. But when the fear of God, or the fear of sin, is disproportionate, out of balance, it too can become negative. When it's too extreme, it's stultifying, paralyzing. Rav Kook saw that stultification in some of the orthodoxy of his day; it's a problem still today. He called for greater creativity and courage in innovation. One of his most famous quotes is:

הַיָּשָׁן יִתְחַדֵּשׁ וְהַחֲדָשׁ יִתְקַדֵּשׁ, וְיִחַדְדוּ יְהוּ לְאֲבוֹקוֹת אֹרִים עַל צִיּוֹן.

The old shall be made new, and the new shall be made holy; and together they will be like torches of light over Zion.²⁴

Now I know that for most of us, spiritual timidity in this sense -- that we're terrified of even the slightest violation of or change in halakhah -- isn't such a big problem. In our communities, we actually could use a little more *yirah* -- a little more awe, a little more fear.

But as we grow spiritually, and we sense and respond to the soul's need to ascend, we're in danger of developing a related fearfulness or timidity, which can also be debilitating, and a barrier to teshuvah. We may fear rising to a level of spirituality at which more will be expected of us than we think we want, or can handle -- whether in terms of our communal commitment, or our observance level. Or just in general: we may fear taking our spiritual lives seriously, admitting to ourselves the extent to which our faith matters. We may fear making a mistake -- not only because it's embarrassing, but maybe our error will violate something sacred, will ruin something, that we're not aware of or don't understand.

And, the more we do teshuvah, and the more spiritually sensitive we become, the more we aware we are of our potential to cause harm, even when we mean well. Certainly, as our consciousness becomes more refined, "higher," we appreciate more fully the depth and breadth of the damage we've done so far. There's a debate in the sources about whether, if you confess certain sins on one Yom Kippur, you should confess them again the next year. One opinion says no, it's like a dog returning to its vomit. You confessed it, you atoned, it's over -- don't wallow in it. The other opinion says you do confess again. Why? Because when you confessed last year, you confessed and atoned at the level of understanding you had then. But that very process of doing teshuvah deepened your understanding. And now, post-that-piece-of-teshuvah, you see the real harm, the real nature of your sin. So of course you need to confess again. As we ascend, we *do* become more fearful of the consequences of our actions, particularly, but not only, if we also tend toward perfectionism! Such fear, Rav Kook says:

. . . is complete foolishness. A person must not be afraid, he only needs to be careful. The more he is afraid, the more he falls, and when he is frightened, the fright itself produces the stumbling. It is therefore important to strengthen one's

24. אגרות רא"ה, א, קס"ד.

self in the understanding that there is no reason to be afraid. All the frightening images are only the fragmented colors of a great vision that needs to be completed, and when it is completed they all merge to engender confidence and great strength that fill the soul with firmness and courage.²⁵

And there's one more fear which, the higher we ascend, the more spiritually sensitive we become, the more we become susceptible to: fear of our own inauthenticity. We may feel anxious that we're really not capable of spiritual sensitivity in a deep way; that there's something fraudulent even in our effort. But like the spiritual pain we spoke about last night, this fear and anxiety is a sign of spiritual health. It's a sign that we are in fact ascending. As Rav Kook says so poetically, shadows always follows light. So it's good to feel that fear of inauthenticity.

It's not good to *yield* to it. And this is where the joy of teshuvah, allowing our strengths to pull us upward, is so important.

How much good people throw away with their own hands because of low level thinking! The spirit of God is ready to seek admittance into their hearts, but they hold on to trivialities. They do not believe in the greatness of their own souls. . .²⁶

This is why Rav Kook said, that although we serve the world by improving our negative aspects, "*even more so* does one serve and improve the condition of the world by raising the [good but] low-level dispositions and thoughts to a higher level. . ."²⁷ Even more so -- because building on our strengths, refining them, helps us to believe in the greatness of our own souls, to have faith in ourselves and our own potential.

We've taken now to calling clergy -- rabbis and others -- "spiritual leaders." That's a good thing -- it reminds those of us with titles what our true work really is. But it's also not a good thing, because it may cause the rest of us to forget that each one of us can be -- *needs* to be -- a spiritual leader.

I'll give the last word of learning together to Rav Kook himself:

When the righteous perform acts of teshuvah (Rav Kook writes) they reveal the holy light that they find in the dark and broken-down alleys in their own lives. The strategies they devise for themselves to elevate their descents and their despair into the bright light of holiness and a nobler level of equity *become in themselves great lights to illumine the world.*

Every person who feels within him or herself the deep remorse of teshuvah, and the anxiety and desire to mend one's flaws—both those flaws whose repair is already possible and within reach, and those flaws one cannot yet repair but hopes, with the mercy of God, to be able to redress one day—*should include him or herself in this category of the righteous.* Because through their thoughts of teshuvah the whole world is renewed in a new light.²⁸

25. Moral Principles, Timidity, #4 (Kook, pp. 178-179).

26. Orot HaKodesh III, p. 123-24 (Essential Writings, p. 183).

27. Orot HaTeshuvah 14:1 (Kook, p. 97-98).

28. Orot HaTeshuvah 8:6 (Kook, p. 65).