

Things Don't Have To Be The Way They Are

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In 1954, Roger Bannister became the first runner to break the four-minute mile. His record run that day was 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. Today it's thought that people believed it couldn't be done. That's not exactly the case, but his story is still instructive.

That was the same year, by the way, that the first American-born rabbi broke the 30-minute high holiday sermon mark, coming in at 29:19:36.

How did he do it?

Bannister trained - although his training fell far short even of the standards of his day. His times improved. But it took more.

First, Bannister believed that it was not a given that the 4-minute time couldn't be broken.

Second, Bannister believed that he could do it.

And he did it.

A man's inability to break the four-minute mile was not an immutable given. With effort and imagination Bannister proved that. He trained and envisioned doing it. He refused to accept as fact that it couldn't be done. He opened the door to change.

After he broke the record, others followed. They too saw that it was possible. Today the men's record is 3:43:13.

Our theme this holiday season is change - *teshuvah*. The root of *teshuvah* is *shuv*: turn, and return.

We turn away from the mistakes we've made. We turn away from the habits we don't like. We turn away from a mind-set stuck in "what is".

Teshuvah is re-turning. We return to our true selves. We return to our values and goals. We return to the God from whom we've turned away.

Teshuvah is predicated on the belief that change is possible. That the way the world is, is not the way it has to be. That the way we are is not the way we have to be.

The way in which we've behaved doesn't dictate the way we *will* behave. The injustices of our society are not givens but can be transformed.

Teshuvah is a decision: to make a change in a world in which that is possible.

Seventy years ago the war ended. Fifty-five years ago Germany began paying reparations to Israel. Mercedes buses and taxis were the standard in Jerusalem. Imagine, today, Germany opening its door to thousands of Syrian refugees while people cheer in the streets.

What if Salk had believed that polio was incurable, if Steve Jobs believed that computer technology had reached its limit, if people across our country continued to believe that blacks are inferior to whites, that women are inferior to men, that gays are inferior to straights.

Think of the Chicago Cubs. 22 games over .500. 7.5 games ahead for the second wild-card spot. Tied for 4th-best record in all of the major leagues. Games in September that actually matter. Oh, be still my beating heart. No matter what happens from here on out, they've proven that change is possible. Ohhhh - the messiah must be coming.

Tradition: Things Don't Have To Be The Way They Are

The Biblical narrative is a revolutionary one. Revolutionary.

Some background.

There is a literary technique used in the Bible. It's called a typology. A typology is a narrative that is repeated throughout the Bible. Sometimes its meaning is derived from variations from one instance to the next. Sometimes its meaning is found through its consistency.

There is typology that runs through Genesis. It's rooted in the law of primogeniture: that the oldest son of a man is his inheritor. He receives his father's blessing, property, title. This was the cultural norm, the law of the land. This was as certain a thing as the sun rising in the east.

But: the biblical narrative features a persistent reversal of that law. Cain is the first-born but God favors his younger brother Abel. Abraham's first-born is Ishmael but Isaac, his second-born, continues the line. Jacob supplants Esau; Judah and Joseph - Reuben; finally, Ephraim supplants Menashe. The biblical author wants us to know: what's seemingly "natural" is not necessarily so.

The Biblical narrative is revolutionary. It upends the status quo instead of defending it.

The givens of a society are not immutable; they are only givens when we accept them as such. The world is not fixed. We can change ourselves and the world around us.

What is, is not sacred. In fact: that which is sacred calls upon us to remake the world in its image. We are not to deify the world as it is; rather, we are to transform the world, piece by piece, day by day, approximating to ever greater degree the sacred call for justice and compassion.

Put differently: the biblical God is not satisfied with the world as it is. The God of the Bible wants things better.

Another example of Biblical thinking is "change thinking".

As we prepare for the holidays, Randi and I coordinate closely. But we have different styles. There's "Randi style" and there's "Marc style". Neither is right, they're just different styles. I'm linear, Randi is not. I start at the beginning and go step by step to the end. Randi thinks association-ally and moves in circles until everything is covered.

Sometimes we even end up in the same place.

Initially, the Israelites were on “Randi time”. The calendar was cyclical. It began at point A, went around to point B, then C, then D . . . then back to point A. Rosh Hashana to Sukkot to Pesah to Shavuot and back to Rosh Hashana again, following the cycles of nature. *Ayn chadash tachat ha-shamesh*, Ecclesiastes said; there is nothing new under the sun.

Change presumes linear time. We do not return, always, to the same place again. We are not doomed, like Sisyphus, to roll the rock up only to have it fall back so that we must start again.

Our ancestors created the notion of history as linear, moving from point A to B and onward, not static but dynamic and evolving. They imagined the coming of a Messiah when the world would reach an ideal state.

Things don’t have to be the way they are. We have the power to change them.

Next year, we can be in a new place.

Next year, we can benefit from changes that we’ve made.

Next year, the world can be better.

Next year, the Messiah might come. *Bashana ha-ba’ah b’Wrigley Field* - next year’s World Series in Wrigley Field.

Interpersonal *T’shuvah*

Never was this teaching more important than today. We are heirs of the Israelites, descendants of the rabbis. Acting on their insights enables us to live a good life.

With these last few minutes, I want to apply these teachings to our personal and to our societal lives today.

First, the personal.

I have a friend, let’s call her Miriam, who had a terrible fight with a sibling. It was not over something trivial, as these things sometimes are. No, this was over something quite important. There were accusations of deceit and theft. The sisters didn’t speak to one another for five years.

Miriam tried several times to make amends. She initiated dialogue, she apologized, she asked that they put it behind them - all to no avail. Finally she gave up. She believed that her sister would never relent and that their relationship could never be fixed.

Recently, though, that changed. Miriam’s sister reestablished contact with her. They reconciled. Unbelievably, they now spend time together talking, celebrating, sharing.

The rabbis of the Talmud wrote of *teshuvah* - of repentance, of turn and return. Find those broken pieces, they said, find them in the most intimate of places - family, friends, workplace - and glue them back together. We can confess; we can apologize; we can make amends.

The call of *teshuvah* is just this: a call to seek out the personal places where there is pain, failure, anger . . . and to do what we can to make them right again.

Where are the broken, the strained relationships in your life? Is there something wrong for which you can

take responsibility and make it up to the person you've hurt? Is there someone to whom you need to apologize?

During this week leading to Yom Kippur identify one thing. One. Make sure you're clear with yourself on what you did wrong - what *you* did wrong. Not what he did wrong or what she did wrong. You. Then figure out what you can do. It might be a call. It might be in person. You might need to apologize to him. You might need to pay her back.

I recommend a letter. You remember letters: paper, pen, envelope, stamp? Handwriting? Letter writing let's us compose our thoughts - and then change what we've written if it doesn't sound right. It gives the other person time to digest it without having to respond immediately.

Pain, anger, separation - it doesn't *have* to be that way. We can take steps to change it.

The rabbis taught of personal *t'shuvah*: seeing that which is broken in our lives as reparable.

Social Justice / *Teshuvah*

The prophets of Israel spoke in God's name calling for the *teshuvah* of social justice. Amos was prominent among them.

In the 8th century BCE Amos was a herdsman, a breeder of sheep and cattle - an affluent man. He saw the ills of his time and called upon his country for an ethical, communal *teshuvah*.

God will punish His people, Amos said,
“because they have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals . . . [they] trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground and make the humble walk a twisted course.” (2:6-7)

Amos knew that the measure of a society is not in its wealth, not in its creativity, not in its military power. No, the measure of a society lies in how it respects the poorest, the weakest, the most vulnerable. The measure of a society lies in its measure of justice.

It is no accident that Martin Luther King quoted Amos in his letter from the Birmingham jail:
“Let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream.” (5:24)

The prophets imagined a world more just. The wealthy could not abuse the poor because they had the wealth. The poor need not suffer indignity because they were poor. Might does not make right. “Right” must govern our exercise of might.

Do *teshuvah*, they said - turn from injustice towards justice. The status quo should not stand. God wants to upend the status quo until justice reigns.

Dr. King wrote: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” (“Strength to Love”)

We live comfortably. More than 99% of all of the human beings who ever have lived. Indoor plumbing; heat and air conditioning; refrigerators and stoves and dish washers. iPods and iPads and iPhones. Food in a grocery store; food in a restaurant. We can fly to Miami in a few hours or drive to Colorado in a couple of days. All of these are good things and we need feel no guilt.

And we live in a time of great challenge and controversy. What shall the law of the land be regarding immigrants without documentation? What shall we do about gun violence? What is our role with regard to gay rights? What might we do about the reversal of civil liberties and voting rights in some southern states . . . and the racism that persists in a northern city like Chicago?

What about abortion rights for women and the trafficking of women and minors? What about the obscene disparity between the wealth of the few and the poverty of the many, where education and medical care and food are unavailable and basic human dignity is thus diminished?

Amos calls to us from 2,500 years ago: where is justice . . . and where is justice not yet?

Our comfort comes not only from our material abundance but also from the distance we put between ourselves and others. We leave the city behind. We live in safe, affluent neighborhoods. We listen to NPR reports but we don't do anything about them.

We need feel no guilt for what we have. But we ought to feel responsibility. Am I my brother's keeper? Of course. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes.

Every moment can be a moment of comfort and convenience; every moment is a moment of challenge and controversy. It matters only which way we turn. The measure of our lives is not found in our comfort. The measure of our lives is found when we reach beyond our own and see to the welfare of others.

More justice is possible.

Think of the past fifty years: changes for blacks; women; gays; people with disabilities; transgendered people. There is still far to go. But the world today is almost unrecognizable.

Think of the Bush administration's work in Africa. 5 billion dollars a year in humanitarian aid. 15 million for work on HIV and AIDS. 1.2 billion to fight malaria. A 2009 study showed that 1.1 million deaths had been averted by the AIDS work alone. And how many more since then?

None of this is simple. And none of it is easy. I'm not Pres. Bush and I'm not Martin Luther King.

But I'm not nobody either. And neither are you. Within our B'Chavana community we have skills. We have talents. We have experience. We have the strength of our community. We can, if we choose, make a difference. But we need to choose. And that will be the topic of my sermon on Yom Kippur morning: the *teshuvah* of social justice and the importance of it within our mission as B'Chavana.

Conclusion

The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu said: "If you do not change direction you may end up where you're heading."

A chassidic rabbi said: "*Teshuva* seems impossible. But the first step is not so hard. Simply turn around and head in the other direction."

The contemporary philosopher "anonymous" said: "If you keep doing what you're doing you'll keep getting what you're getting."

Bannister changed the record . . . and our notion of what was possible.

The prophets and the rabbis affirmed our freedom and power to make those changes.

That is *t'shuvah* - changing our own direction, changing the direction of the world.

The world is not immutable. Change is possible. Things don't have to be the way they are. Things *don't* have to be the way they are.

Shana tova.