

## **Yom Kippur 5780 Rebuilding and Returning**

Please put up your hand if you have ever tried to build a piece of furniture from a kit. Maybe from Ikea? Or Wayfair? Or Target?

Please keep your hand up if it didn't come out quite like you planned.

And please show us if at some point it went wrong and you had to go back and undo something you'd already done, and start over.

Thank you...

Please keep hold of the feelings that little exercise brought back.

There are so many ways to describe what we try to do on Yom Kippur. At the center of today is the work of *teshuvah* - of returning, of repenting but most of all, of changing - of looking back over the year just gone and making new promises to ourselves about how we will be in the future.

The Hassidic teacher Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, known as the Netivot Shalom, has a way of helping us to make those promises. We find it, not in a teaching about Yom Kippur but when he is writing about the very first day that the desert sanctuary - the Mishkan - is built.

The Mishkan was a project that took place after the disaster of the Golden Calf. Every Israelite brought their most precious possessions to Moses, offering them up with all their heart so as to build a place for God's presence - the *Shekhinah* - to dwell within the community. Moses encourages them, *This is what the Holy One commands you to do*. And from the day the Mishkan opened, the Israelites had a beautiful space in which to gather, to pray, to worship and to make sacrifices.

But the Netivot Shalom notices that the first day the Mishkan opens for business is not the first day of the week. It isn't even the Shabbat of that week. The Mishkan opens on Day 8.

The Netivot Shalom asks: Why did it take so long for the Mishkan to be ready? And he answers his own question: because for all of the seven previous days, the Children of Israel had tried each day to build it - but it kept falling down.

We can imagine how the Children of Israel must have felt. We can imagine them saying to themselves and each other, "We gave our very best to make this place! We brought our offerings with all our hearts! Why won't it just STAY UP?" We can identify with the frustration of starting each day with hope and ending it with disappointment once again. It's exactly the same frustration as we may feel as we try to build our IKEA cabinet or our Wayfair table. And each time it comes out wrong, we feel like we are losing a little bit more of our grip.

The Netivot Shalom teaches that the process of *teshuvah* is just like this. He writes:

*We put so much energy into building our inner Sanctuary so that the Shekhinah might dwell in us - but after all this effort we make a mistake and the whole thing comes apart.*

And after things have fallen apart a given number of times, we might well decide to abandon the project. Who needed that IKEA cabinet anyway?! Why should we try to be better people if it's so hard?

But it is precisely at this point, the Netivot Shalom teaches, we must recognize that - as Moses instructs - *This is what the Holy One commands you to do, so that you may encounter the Holy One.* It is precisely at this point, as we contemplate the bits and pieces of what we have tried so hard to create lying scattered around us once more, that we have to find what it takes to start over.

This is how the Netivot Shalom describes the process:

*When that happens, [when everything falls down,] our job is to turn around, take heart and set out to rebuild our spiritual home. Even if it comes apart again, we must build it once again. This is what the Holy One commands you to do - to attain to the eighth day, the quality of teshuvah, we must do again as the Holy One commanded on the seven days of creation.*

*Whenever we fall and our spiritual world collapses around us - which is like the dismantling of the Sanctuary - we must raise it up anew. Even if we have done teshuvah over and over, changing and failing, we must not allow our spirits to fall and become despondent. Rather, we must take heart and set out to build ourselves once again.*

So according to the Netivot Shalom, the work of *teshuvah* isn't about throwing everything out and beginning anew. Rather, it's building the resilience to do the same work over and over without being sidetracked into thinking that we should change what we were doing. It's a matter of confidence: if we've identified the parts of ourselves we want to work on, we have to believe that was a good decision. We just need to find it in ourselves to begin once more.

The question, though, is how we find it in ourselves to keep going. A number of you have shared with me that Yom Kippur feels hard because it's 'depressing'. And today is hard work, indeed. Fasting is hard: being thirsty is hard: being tired is hard: looking back on what we've done wrong is hard: and trying to change ourselves is some of the hardest work that we ever do as human beings. Is there any way of approaching the continuing breaking down and rebuilding of our internal Mishkan, the work of *teshuvah*, in a positive spirit?

On Rosh Hashanah we considered approaching the project like Marie Kondo would approach decluttering - keep what 'sparks joy' and let the rest go. The Netivot Shalom has a different understanding of how to keep ourselves focused and encouraged:

*The Torah teaches that the oil for the Menorah was to be of beaten olives... we must be hard on ourselves, but only so long as it is for the sake of enlightenment. The results of our broken hearts should only be to bring us to greater light, not to bring us down into depression and apathy. Thus we are to understand that there is a way of being hard on ourselves that leads to...building up...two acts are completed as one, both constructing the Sanctuary and breaking it down, such that bitterness and joy function together as one...we can experience an inner crushing that is for the sake of light, a bitterness that comes from the realm of building.*

What a beautiful paradox this is. The process of destruction is itself part of the process of building. The bitterness of getting it wrong is part and parcel of the joy of getting it right. The Mishkan is supposed to fall down because it gives us the chance to find it in ourselves to build it - one more time.

In this city we identify very deeply with breaking down and rebuilding. This Yom Kippur, let that serve as inspiration as we work on our internal Mishkan - building ourselves into stronger, more honest, more capable, more compassionate human beings. Let us keep working, in the knowledge that even if it doesn't all happen today, one day we will look back and realize that we have changed ourselves for the better. And the structure in our hearts will be ready, at last, to let the *Shekhinah* in.

G'mar hatimah tovah.