

**Turning**  
Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth  
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I am fond of saying, as we consider sin and repentance each year, that we probably don't have any murderers or bank robbers in the congregation this evening, and—if we set aside going a few miles over the speed limit—probably few if any habitual law-breakers.

But then Bernie Madoff's rabbi used to think that, too!

And not all sins are against the secular law. In the 10 Commandments, after all, adultery and coveting are right up there with theft and murder, and we are also commanded to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” All sins are not created equal, thank God. But even if our sins are not as bad as some others', that does not let us off the hook on Yom Kippur. God and Torah call us to stop making excuses and do better. *Teshuva*, usually translated “repentance,” literally means “turning.” It is supposed to be about changing course in life. To keep on track, sail boaters are advised to keep their eyes on a distant landmark. If you feel yourself drifting off course, you steer back towards the landmark. That is a course-adjustment, not a 180 degree turn! Are we leading the sorts of lives we aim—or should aim!—to lead? Major sinners should, by all means, in Isaiah's words, “cease to do evil; learn to do good.” (1:16-17) But the more common sins are what our *machzor* will stress in our confessions tomorrow morning:

For our failures of truth, O God, we ask forgiveness.

For passing judgement without knowledge of the facts,...

For deceiving ourselves and others with half-truths,...

For condemning in our children the faults we tolerate in ourselves,...

For condemning in our parents the faults we tolerate in ourselves,...

For the sin of silence and indifference....

For withholding love to control those we claim to love,...

For narrow-mindedness... for hatred, arrogance, hypocrisy, (and so on).

(GOR, pp. 327-31)

Course adjustments mostly. Easier than the 180 degree turns that ceasing to steal, embezzle, or murder require, and you don't risk going to jail admitting them. Still, few of us are good at admitting faults even to ourselves, much less asking forgiveness from God, or from people close to us.

Some years ago, when a major politician was caught in one of the sexual scandals that seem so common these days, he later referred to this meditation from our Reform Selichot service (the little service the week before these Holy Days that is supposed to help put us in repentance mode):

Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange.

The birds are beginning to turn and are headed once more towards the South. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds, and animals turning comes instinctively. But for us turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means

admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy. It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful. It means saying: I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways. Lord, help us to turn . . . .

(Gates of Forgiveness, p. 23)

At the next Selichot service, as I was about to read that "Turning" meditation, thinking people would be impressed, I mentioned that this politician—not even Jewish!—had recently quoted it. That did not make quite the impression I had in mind. People snickered! —As if to say, "O, yeah, he has turned his life around! At least 'til the next pretty face smiles in his direction."

Perhaps we have grown jaded. I for one will admit, listening to one prominent person after another claiming they are sorry for what they have done (Madoff said that, too), I do wonder if they are truly sorry, or just sorry they got caught?

So are *we* better? We are not in the headlines, thank God; but are we better? What is it that you and I have to repent for this year? We know we are not perfect. Do we want to be better? Perhaps another source of our cynicism is internal. Do we doubt others can change because we ourselves keep thinking the same thoughts each Yom Kippur—I should be more loving, less impatient, more involved in Jewish life—you name it . . . but I probably won't change this year, either?

Ours is not the first generation to wonder if repentance is more than lip-service. If cynicism about repentance were new, the book of Jonah would not be in the Bible.

Jonah, you will recall, is the hero (or anti-hero) of a unique little book. Of the 15 books each named for a different prophet in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), 14 consist primarily of the words of spiritual giants, their moral critique of the biblical world, their warnings to their contemporaries. Only one, the unique little book of Jonah, is a book *about* a prophet, not a collection of a prophet's teachings. Jonah, far from being a spiritual giant, is a shlemiel.

God tells Jonah to go and warn Nineveh that, for their sins, they are soon going to be destroyed. For the Jewish prophet, Nineveh was to the north and east (it was the capital of Assyria; you can find its archaeological remains today just outside of Mosul in northern Iraq). So where did Jonah go? He hopped a ship and headed due west. "Get me out of here! I'm not delivering news of doom to the capital of the regional super power! Stupid I'm not!"

Most know the story, no doubt. As the ship gets off into the Mediterranean such a fierce storm comes up that everyone on board thinks the ship is going to break up and they are all going to die. The captain tells them all to pray, but their various pagan gods can do nothing for them. The true God, after all, is angry. Only Jonah is not praying. He has gone below to take a nap!

When the captain wakes him, Jonah puts it all together and does about the only decent thing he does in the whole book. He tells them that the storm is his fault; all they have to do is

throw him overboard and they will be alright. Good men that the sailors are, they try to row back to shore. It is hopeless. So they heave Jonah overboard . . . and the storm stops!

A great fish swallows Jonah and, several days later, vomits him up on shore outside of Nineveh (quite a neat trick, we might add, since Nineveh is hundreds of miles from the nearest coast. Don't sweat the details; this is moral fable, not a geography text.). Jonah knows when he is licked. In effect, Jonah repents. He goes and does what God required of him. –If even the Great Shlemiel can change and do what he is supposed to do, we should infer, so can we.

Jonah delivers his prophecy. The whole thing is 5 words: *od arba'im yom, v'ninvey nehpačet!* “40 days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed!” You know those other 14 books named for prophets in the Bible? Lots of them say similar things. The spiritual giants go on chapter after chapter after chapter telling anyone and everyone to stop sinning. No one listens. There is one truly successful prophet in the Bible: the shlemiel! To Jonah, who did not want to be there in the first place, the people listen. They sit in sackcloth and ashes and from the least of them to the King on his throne they implore God for forgiveness. So God, of course, forgives them.

That is the main message of the book. God could have drowned Jonah. He deserved it. God could have wiped Nineveh off the map. But they repented! So can we.

Jonah, of course, should be thrilled. He is annoyed and depressed! “You said you'd kill them, God; I knew you'd wimp out and forgive them. You're always forgiving people. And now

I've lost face!" Jonah thought the whole story was about him. God thought the story was about Nineveh. And the author—you can hear the rest tomorrow afternoon—wants the whole thing to be about repentance. God, the author of Jonah shows us, is always, in Jonah's words, which echo the Torah's, "slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment." (4:2) God will let us, and maybe even help us, adjust course.

Are we, like Jonah, self-centered, obliviousness to the problems of others, spoiled and whiny? If we would just try harder, God would understand.

Are we, like the Ninevites, aggressive and pitiless (that is the reputation Nineveh cultivated), obsessed with power and influence, or amassing wealth? There are plenty of prophetic voices telling us life is about more important things—or should be. If only we will listen, God will help.

We can change. People don't always change. That's for sure. Jonah did not. Even after God hit him over the head with a 2 x 4, as it were, and made him do the right thing. Being smart enough to be a prophet is no guarantee of being sensitive enough to care about others, and thus wanting to be a *mensch*. But we *can* change. Even Ninevites—that Gentile city of rapacious armies whom everyone hated--could see that. That is not setting the bar very high. The Tanakh, and then the rabbis who selected this book for Yom Kippur, are telling us that repentance is not so hard: God is a softy!

So how do we repent? Unless you are atypically perverse (there are such people, but fortunately not many!) –unless you are one of the rare truly evil ones, jettison the mistaken notion of magical change which probably comes from the fancy theological word “repentance.” *Teshuvah* is not about 180 degree course reversals. *Teshuvah* is just turning, adjusting course.

So what are we unhappy with ourselves about in the past year? We should have been more loving to someone? We should have hollered less? We should have worked harder? Or we shouldn't have worked so hard? We should have exercised more? Or prayed more, or studied more—soul exercise to go with the body's exercise? Or we should have given more? The possibilities are infinite. But we each know our own sins. Adjust course.

Each night, perhaps before you go to sleep, ask yourself—or ask God—if you have lived as you want to be living? Probably more often than not the answer will be “yes,” and with that positive reinforcement you will be prepared for the times when the answer is, “No, I really blew it today.” Once a day too often? Judaism is carefully designed to give a rhythm to our weeks. We used to just have Shabbat; now we have a whole weekend. Pick a time. Look yourself in the mirror each weekend—this is a creative way to make the Sabbath holy—and say, “what could I do to polish up that image of God staring back at me?” And I don't mean a face-lift; it is spiritual uplift we need.

Not just annually, but daily or weekly, pick a spiritual spot to keep your eye on—like the sailboat skipper, only make it an image of the person you want to be--and make sure you are heading in the direction you want to go. Amen.