

“Brick Walls and Teshuvah”

Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg’s sermon, Erev Rosh haShanah, 5769 / 2008

Shanah Tovah!

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, once told this story right before the blowing of the shofar for Rosh haShanah.

Once there was a powerful king who was so powerful that he managed to create an illusion, or if you will pardon an anachronism, he created a hologram, of a palace and high walls and gates surrounding him.

Then he invited his subjects to come to visit him in the palace. But almost everyone who approached the palace was deterred by the fortress-like quality of the castle, the high brick walls and moats and gates.

Only one subject -- the king’s son—figured out that the palace walls weren’t real—they were an illusion—and he could walk right through them and come right to the king.

Now when the Baal Shem Tov told this story, right before the blowing of the shofar, he then said, “The meaning of this story -- is obvious.”

For us, though, maybe the meaning is not so obvious.

In Hasidic stories, the King tends to be God. (Maybe that part’s obvious.) and the subjects—are us, longing to get into the palace, to get close to God, perhaps that means: to live godly and holy lives; to return to living the kind of life we feel we ought to live, we feel we are meant to live, to feel a sense of divine approval for the way we are living our lives; maybe to come close to a spiritual tradition—to come closer to our spiritual selves, for some of us, to come closer in contact with God through Jewish tradition.

So why did the Baal Shem Tov tell this story on Rosh haShanah?

I think, because Rosh haShanah a “brick wall” kind of holiday.

Rosh haShanah carries with it the excitement and promise of a new year—a new beginning, an opportunity for change. This period of time between Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur is the time period when we focus on Teshuvah—repentance, or more literally, ‘returning’ to be the person we know we are and are meant to be.

But getting there is not so easy—there are a lot of barriers in our way.

For example: Each Rosh haShanah I start the year with an ambitious set of goals. I’m going to treat my family and friends better this year. I am going to be more devoted in my professional life and my academic life, I’m going to be more organized at home and in my office, more thoughtful, I’m going to make sure that I return all phone calls and e-mails promptly, I’m going to keep in touch with all those friends I have lost touch with, And also I’m going to spend more time with my wife and my kids.

Oh, and I nearly forgot: I’m also going to do a better job taking care of myself—I’m going to exercise more, I’m going to make sure I get more sleep— and then I add up the number of hours in the day and I realize—we have a problem.

One of the barriers to teshuvah is—simply trying to change too much at the same time. And yet the story asserts: for one who is really drawn to come into God’s presence, The

barriers that we perceive are actually illusions. And once we realize this, we can walk right through them.

Earlier this year, some of us from the synagogue attended a conference on synagogue change and renewal.

And the smartest take-away message from this conference for me was: the secret to change in any organization is not about how to make broad, sweeping, global changes. The real secret is how to CHOOSE a few small, carefully targeted changes that will end up affecting and transforming the entire system.

And with our lives, it's the same way.

Can I choose just a few small and specific ways I can change in the coming year that will have an effect on my entire life? When I think about it this way, what looked like an imposing fortress is now not nearly as impenetrable as I had thought.

Another barrier to the process of teshuvah for many of us— is a fear of failure—a fear that we might invest our entire selves into this process of teshuvah, of returning, And then not succeed perfectly, and we'll end up feeling even worse. But this genuine barrier, too, can be rendered illusory.

We can take a lesson from the Amish quilt makers from Pennsylvania who have the tradition of putting some flaw into the design of each quilt they make—simply to highlight that things that human beings make aren't **supposed** to come out perfect. Perfection is for God, And if we are satisfied only with perfection, we will end up giving up much too soon.

As the book of Proverbs says, — באהבתה תשגה תמיד —in our love for God, we will end up making mistakes constantly.

What's another barrier to teshuvah? The fear and awkwardness involved with admitting a mistake, or making an apology. The challenges of being reconciled with people with whom we have had severe disagreements. But so much of the time, we know that that anticipatory fear turns into relief when we ARE able to put a disagreement to rest or resolve an interpersonal difficulty. It is a REAL barrier—but often it is an illusion.

For some people who are contemplating changing their relationship with Judaism at this time of year—fear and anxiety can be a barrier: if I start to learn more about Judaism or to take Judaism more seriously, will that be weird for the people around me? Will I be embarrassed? Will I be able to learn enough to keep up? Without any doubt, one of the barriers to serious engagement with Jewish tradition is the TREMENDOUS quantity of things to learn and to know.

But with appropriate perspective, that barrier becomes an illusion. As Einstein said, anyone who is willing to devote 15 minutes a day to learning something will become an expert in it by year's end. (Yes, I know you're thinking: "Maybe that was true for EINSTEIN." But actually, ALL of us can gain competence in Jewish tradition if we are simply willing to put in a moderate amount of time and effort.)

800 years ago, Moses Maimonides made a list of 24 things that are barriers to teshuvah—
ארבע ועשרים דברים מעכבין את התשובה.

Maimonides' list includes, for example, that many of us have an excessive fear of what other people think of us. This can certainly deter us from making changes in our lives that we really want to make, but that we fear may not be met with approval from everyone around us.

Also on his list of barriers is a fear of receiving negative feedback—which can impede spiritual growth—as well as every other kind of personal growth.

And a third item on his list is a need to measure oneself up against others' achievements and traits— which permits us to get ourselves off the hook for things we know we want to change if we see those qualities in others.

All these barriers to teshuvah—what would the Baal Shem tov say about them?

He would say: they may look imposing, they make the fortress of teshuvah look impregnable—but they are all illusions. They are part of the mechanism inside ourselves that encourages inertia, that encourages the status quo. Sometimes the highest and strongest barriers simply dissolve when you start to walk through them.

This year's best-selling inspirational book is called “the Last Lecture,” by Professor Randy Pausch. I imagine many of you have read it, or seen Pausch's last lecture on the internet. He was a leading professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University—a couple of years ago, at age 45, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. At a point when his treatments appeared to be effective, he agreed to speak at a lecture series at his university, a series that used to be called “the Last lecture,” in which professors would attempt to sum up their personal and professional wisdom as if it were truly the “last lecture” they would ever give.

By the time Pausch spoke, he had found out his cancer had metastasized, and he knew that this really WAS going to be his last lecture. He spoke about his illness, and his outlook, and how he regarded his life as a success because—despite his very real sadness of facing death in his mid-40's—he had systematically gone through his childhood dreams and fulfilled each of them, in whole or in part. Trust me, Randy Pausch didn't say much in his lecture that you didn't already know: spend time with your family, value relationships instead of things, be truthful and sincere, find joy in every day and count your blessings. But it's not the kind of genre that is about transmitting new information—rather, it's about helping people to re-discover and truly integrate into their lives what they already know— and that's what made his presentation so powerful.

After the lecture was put on the internet, it became a world-wide phenomenon, eventually leading to his book, which is a very frank and unsentimental—and frankly, joyous, account of what it's like to be young with a young family and a terminal illness.

This summer, Randy Pausch died at age 47. In his lecture and his book, Randy Pausch likes the image of brick walls. I'm pretty sure he wasn't a student of the Baal Shem Tov, but he appears to say much the same thing. He says that the brick walls we encounter, that seem to come between us and our goals, are often an illusion. They are in place not to keep us out, but to let us show how much we want something, to make the quest more challenging.

It's not that Randy Pausch didn't realize that the world contains inevitable and unpleasant realities. Randy Pausch's medical condition was of course the biggest unmovable brick

wall of all. And yet he was determined not to let it stop him from living as fully and joyously as he could. Towards the end of Randy Pausch's last lecture at Carnegie Mellon, the president of the university approached the podium and made a surprise announcement: that a new bridge will be built on the Carnegie-Mellon campus that will be named after Randy Pausch. And the president joked, "based on your talk, we're thinking of putting a brick wall at either end. Let's see what our students can do with that!

The president wasn't joking. The original plan actually was to have a hologram of a brick wall in the middle of the bridge, that people could walk right through. Imagine how powerful that would be for YOU if YOU had the opportunity to walk through a hologram of a brick wall—bearing the story of the Baal Shem Tov in mind.

It would have been great.

Jews around the world would be making pilgrimages to Pittsburgh every year right before Rosh haShanah Just to walk through the brick wall.

But alas—that plan was too expensive—so the current plan is to use another kind of optical illusion— the bridge is being designed in a way that gives pedestrians a sense that a brick wall is ahead of them at the end, And yet they will be able to walk right through. It's like an architectural representation of the process of teshuvah. A metaphorical representation of what each of us is attempting to do over the next ten days.

May your new year of 5769 be a year of contentment and satisfaction, happiness, kindness, good health, a year of homecoming, of mitzvot, and yes, a year of walking through whatever brick walls are necessary to bring you closer to God and closer to being the person you yearn to be.

Shanah Tovah!!