

Erev Tov, good evening. Welcome to CJC's annual retreat on teshuvah/repentance and forgiveness. Embedded in this retreat is the assumption that we want to change; we want to improve and we want to mature. For if we do not, all the prayers, all the music, all the English readings, all the time for personal reflection, all the sermons in the world are for naught.

Having said that, I think it is important to truly raise up that assumption. Do we really want to change? Or are we going through the motions just like we do on December 31, knowing that within one month we will revert back to who we were on December 30th. So I ask again, do we want to change, really change, change so that it hurts, change so that it humbles and allows us to be better people than we ever thought we could possibly be? True *teshuvah* takes time, takes effort, takes desire and often it takes failure before succeeding to become the person we hoped to become. True change is not a mantra or pithy quote but rather a difficult challenge meant to tire and exhaust us along the way. As author, Ed Kelie wrote in "The Ripple of Time," "A work happens when it is ready, sometimes a few days in a row, other times sitting untouched for weeks. Steady and slow evolution, echoing the process of nature; Creation through removal, a few grams of dust at a time. And life goes on. We have our ups and down, the clock ticks and days pass. People come and go from our lives. A few more grams are removed. You witness development of your end goal, progress in a small pile. ... Emotional highs and lows, an endless cycle of waves.....Only through time do we find true understanding of ourselves." For if repentance was truly easy, we would all be angels, with no need for one full day dedicated to *teshuvah* and forgiveness. I do not know about you, but although I may be many things, an angel just is not one of them. As Maimonides wrote in the Guide to the Perplexed, "A sudden transition from one opposite to another is impossible, and therefore a human being, according to his/her nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which s/he was accustomed."

One could argue that teshuvah is not the ultimate goal anyway. The purpose of this retreat is not to discover all I have done wrong and then identify it with the expressed goal of perfecting myself in the coming year, though that would be a wonderful outcome. It is not the ultimate goal. Rabbi David Wolpe wrote, “We think of self-examination...as a path to repentance. But it is more fundamental than a step toward something else: We examine ourselves to know who we are. Our darkness and our sins are part of us, stitched into our soul. Without coming to grips with what you have done wrong, you can never understand your soul.” Understanding our soul. I always think of Peter Pan trying to catch his shadow. Every time he turns around, his shadow disappears from his sight. Every time I think I truly understand who I am, something happens that proves I have no clue! Seeing our own soul, our own essence, is one of the most difficult and courageous challenges we can undertake as human beings.

What could be more meaningful than understanding the essence of who we are, celebrating the strengths and recognizing the weaknesses, harnessing the strengths to transform the weaknesses, not with the purpose of eradicating them, for as Rabbi Wolpe wrote, they are a part of us. But rather with the goal of transforming them into something else. Many of you have heard me tell the story of the king and the diamond. In my mind’s eye it is truly the story of *teshuvah*. So I hope you indulge me as I tell it one more time. Recently I read that this folktale was attributed to a Jewish teacher, Jacob ben Wolf Kranz, Maggid of Dubno who lived in the 1700s.

There was once a very wealthy king who owned many beautiful things. He had cloth tapestries, piles of gold, and statues made by the very best artists in the land. Of all of his belongings, his very favorite possession was the most glorious diamond you can imagine.

It was huge—as big around as his hand. And it was pure—clear and flawless, without any marks or blemishes. He loved to go and sit with that diamond, gazing at its beauty and perfection. One day when the king went to look at his diamond, he discovered to his horror that it had a long, deep scratch. He couldn't believe his eyes! What could have happened to his flawless diamond?

Immediately he sent for all of the best stone cutters and diamond cutters in his kingdom. One by one they came to inspect the diamond. Each looked at it closely and then sadly shook his head. The scratch was too deep. If they tried to polish it they might break the diamond into pieces.

Finally one last diamond cutter came before the king. When I was told this story, he was a poor schlep, wearing rags with a heavy Yiddish accent I cannot imitate. He looked at the diamond closely, gazing at it from every angle. Suddenly the diamond cutter's face broke into a big smile. "I know how to fix this, your majesty!" he exclaimed. "Leave it to me. In two weeks' time I will return your diamond to you, better than ever. However, you may not visit me during this time or check on my progress. You must wait until it is finished."

What did the king have to lose? All of the wealthiest, skilled craftsman could not fix the diamond. It was worthless with this scratch. He flung it to the man believing that he would return soon with the diamond at best exactly the same, at worse in many small pieces.

As for the diamond cutter, day after day, night after night, he brought out his tools to fix that diamond. Bit by bit, he worked on that scratch. It was slow, tedious work. He knew he had to work carefully or the diamond could crack into pieces.

Finally the diamond cutter was finished. Carefully he wrapped the diamond in cloth to protect it, and he brought it before the king. "Here it is, your majesty," he said. With a flourish he opened the cloth and presented the diamond.

The king slowly turned the diamond to appreciate the perfect sides, careful not to even glance at the scratch until there were no more sides to look at. He took one last look, one deep breath and braced to be disappointed. When he turned to where the scratch had once been, he saw carved all around it a beautiful rose with the scratch serving as the stem. Unable to polish the scratch out of the diamond, the diamond cutter had instead turned the flaw into something beautiful. He couldn't believe how beautiful it was. The scratch, our flaws, are not removed. But rather when we are lucky, we are carved into a beautiful rose - more beautiful than ever because of that scratch, not inspite of it.

Whenever I study about *teshuvah*, I start out interested and engaged but eventually I find some of it slightly self-absorbing and self-indulging, spending many hours thinking about me and my growth as if I live in a vacuum, disconnected from other human beings. Should I spend my time during this Yom Kippur retreat thinking about myself? Yes, for sure. Should I pretend that what I do does not affect anyone else? Absolutely not. If climate change has taught us anything, it is that we are all interconnected, with each and with all other living beings, as well as the planet we know as home, planet Earth. If I allow all bees to die due to pesticide, then 35 percent of the 100 crop species that provide us with 90% of our food will die as well. If I allow the fires in the Amazon forest to be burned, I will lose 20% of the oxygen I need to stay alive. If I refuse to advocate for Howard County to become a safe haven for my undocumented neighbors, I will eventually be a victim of violence with witnesses who are too frightened to testify. For as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote "Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

So what am I going to do in the coming year which will make me take my human responsibility seriously? What can my soul constructively contribute to this fractured world we live in? For each of us, every single one of us is part of the whole. Without one of us, any one of us, all of our lives are diminished. Each of us is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Where am I going to place my piece, my efforts, my attention, my time, and my finances in the coming year? Are we going to open our eyes to truly see our role in the global community? Are we going to open our pocketbooks to the causes we believe in? Are we going to volunteer for the efforts that we think we can constructively contribute to?

What piece are you willing to be in our jigsaw puzzle? What is the most important purpose your soul needs to actualize here, at home, at school, on the job, in our county, state or country? Where can you be the hope, the possibility, the change, our contemporary world badly needs?

I am quite aware of how bleak our world appears, how fractured; how argumentative, how unyielding our civil or uncivil discourse has become. But truly, it is our soul's job to find the light we each are meant to be. Desmond Tutu wrote, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." He must have been thinking of the *Ner Tamid*, the eternal light housed in our portable ark. Wherever we go it goes with us. The light in our main ark in the meeting house is always on. Whether we walk in the room, open the ark doors, or breathe in a deep breath of appreciation or not, Gd's light is always lit. If only we would take the time to see it, read by it, pray with our feet following it, live our life according to it.

In a moment we will turn to p. 736 for the *chatzi kaddish*, the prayer singing Gd's praises. In *B'reishit*, the first Torah portion of the bible, we are told that we were created in the image of Gd. May we use this time to rediscover Gd's image buried deep inside of us - not for the purpose of getting lost there, but rather for the goal of rediscovering the potential for good embedded in each and every one of us. May we have the strength and courage to draw that good out in the coming year, becoming the person we always hoped to be.