

**EREV ROSH HASHANA  
TESHUVA  
SEPTEMBER 18, 2009  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

When a Habsburg monarch died, the cortege arrived at Kapuzinerguft in Vienna and the Major Domo knocked three times on the door with his staff. A guard asked who was there and the Major Domo replied, “His Imperial, Royal and Apostolic Majesty, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary,” and added another 586 such titles. There was no response from the inside. The knocking and the litany of titles were repeated. Finally, on the third time, upon being asked “Who is there”? The Major Domo answered, “A poor sinner,” and the door slowly opened.

We come on the evening of Rosh Hashana 5770 to recognize that we are all in the same category. We are bereft of our titles, our external façade, the masks that we wear, and we stand with our imperfections before our Maker. It is time for us to recognize who we really are, what kind of life we are leading. It is not an easy task. It is much simpler and more convenient to live lives wearing those masks, to not be confronted by the truth about ourselves and to look at our lives with rose-colored glasses.

I think each of us needs Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur because without these Days of Awe we would never do a thorough evaluation of our lives and how we live them. We would shy away from asking the difficult questions that must guide our sense of proper living. We would not be truthful with ourselves lest we be dissatisfied with the answers. Some people go through their lives in exactly that fashion. Our tradition teaches us that we cannot do so and, at least, during the Ten Days of Penitence, beginning with Rosh Hashana and ending with Yom Kippur, we must strip away all of the outward trappings that tend to define us and re-examine our souls, our conduct and our life. It may be a complex activity, but our tradition teaches us that it has a cleansing purpose.

In our Torah reading of last week, Moses informs the Israelites that the process is really not that difficult.

“Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens... neither is it beyond the sea... no, the thing is very close to you, in your heart and in your mouth, to observe it.” Most commentators, including the Biblical commentator Rashi, see this as an attestation that the Torah, or at least the Book of Deuteronomy, is not unintelligible or so challenging that it is impossible to follow and observe. However, another commentator, the Ramban, Nachmanides, suggests that we look at the context of Moses’ words, and that context is the Mitzvah of Repentance. Moses is suggesting to the Children of Israel that it is difficult to break a bad habit, but not impossible to change one’s way of life. People who have succeeded in doing so will testify that it can be done. It does, though, require work and sacrifice.

One of the most terrible moments for Moses in the desert journey in the Sinai wilderness was the rebellion of Korach. Korach, a Levite like Moses himself, brought together over 250 people who rebelled against Moses' leadership. He believed that Moses was usurping power for himself and that all the Levites should be entitled to a personal relationship with G-d. Moses, according to the Biblical text, did not know how to deal with the challenge of Korach so he turned to G-d and G-d reaffirmed Moses' leadership. The way G-d does so is by enacting a miracle of nature to show that G-d is all-powerful. The Torah tells us, "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korach's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the Congregation."

In a census enumerated for us in Numbers 26, we are informed of Korach's ancestors and then the Torah states: "Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korach, and that band died when the fire consumed 250 men, and they became an example." The Torah then continues: "The sons of Korach, however, did not die."

This short verse puzzled many Talmudic, medieval and modern commentators. Korach's own sons did not die in the rebellion. Did that mean that they were not part of it or did something happen that they were not swallowed up into the abyss?

Most of the commentators suggest that initially Korach's sons were part of the rebellion. However, they listened carefully to Moses' words and those of their father and they decided that they would follow the G-d of Israel. They learned their lesson and repented. Rashi informs us that in the beginning they were part of the rebellion, for they were sensitive to their father's complaints. However, as the rebellion ensued, they did Teshuva, repentance in their hearts and, therefore, were saved this horrible death.

It is important to note that their descendants survived to become an important Levitical clan of Temple singers. Psalms 42 and 44 through 49 all begin with the introductory verse stating that this is a Psalm of the Children of Korach. They also served as Temple guards at the most prestigious location, the entrance to the Temple itself. Thus, even under the most extraordinary circumstances when in their own household their father was fomenting a rebellion against Moses and G-d, the sons of Korach could withstand all the pressure of the moment and do Teshuva, perform repentance, and not be swallowed either in the rebellion or ensuing punishment. Repentance itself is not so difficult. If there is a will, there is a way.

Without a doubt, the archenemy of the Jewish people has been Amalek. In the desert journey they were the ones who attacked the Israelites from behind and we are told to remember what Amalek did to the Israelites and wipe any memory of their name off the face of this earth. One of their descendants, much later in Jewish history, Haman, tried to destroy the Jews of Persia. We were victorious and since that time whenever we hear his name, during the reading of the Scroll of Esther on Purim, we make enough noise to drown out any memory of that name. Yet, there is a Talmudic tradition which

states that the grandchildren of Haman, a descendant of Amalek, taught Torah in the great center of Jewish learning, B'nei Brak. There are those who even add the words: "And who was this grandchild of Haman? The great scholar, Rabbi Akiva."

While it is only a legend, it does inform us that the Rabbis believed that change is possible, that repentance could be demonstrated as people looked at their lives, their own mortality, the meaning and significance of what they were accomplishing here on earth and come to the conclusion that they could do better, that they needed to change before it was too late.

The word "change" has become a political term and was used throughout the last Presidential campaign. What I'd like to suggest this evening, as we inaugurate the year 5770, is that we take it out of its political context and let it serve more as a reflective process for us upon our lives and the meaning of our days. Our scholars taught us that it is a process. We must first examine to see who we are and what we have become and since we are all made with frailties and weaknesses, recognize that we must change for the better and do Teshuva.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great teacher of the Mussar Movement, taught us: "Every human being is endowed by the Maker with two eyes. With one he is expected to look at his neighbor, fastening his gaze on his virtues, his excellences, and desirable qualities. With the other eye, he is to turn inward to see his own weaknesses, his imperfections, and his shortcomings in order to correct them." We are not asked to examine the lives of our fellow human being and to suggest how they may correct their weaknesses. Instead, Rabbi Salanter tells us, we must look at our own lives and see how we can improve.

My teacher, Rabbi Saul Teplitz, like me, a former President of the Rabbinical Assembly, once wrote that: "'Teshuva' literally means 'return' or 'resolution'. It is one of the most significant concepts in Judaism because it calls for both confession and corrective action. Teshuva calls for looking backward, to find out where we went wrong, and then to choose a new approach." His teacher, Professor Louis Ginzberg wrote: "Repentance is not remorse for the past, but a serious attempt to profit in the future by the lessons of the past."

Rabbi Teplitz then tells a story about something that is now becoming extinct, the telephone booth. He writes that there was a newspaper report that a policeman rushed to a telephone booth in response to an emergency call from a man who said he was lost in the booth. The policeman quickly released the caller by explaining to him that the door opened inwards, not outwards. Rabbi Teplitz then goes on to say: "Repentance demands the door of kindness be opened from within ourselves. It is not what happens to us that counts as much as what happens in us."

We come on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to recognize that we can be better people. We must search our souls, the recesses of our minds and examine our hearts. How did we do this year? Were we responsible human beings? Were we caring

family members? Were we kind to the stranger and as generous as we could be? How are we different from last year when we stood on the eve of the New Year 5769 and during the course of the Ten Days of Repentance said that we would improve our conduct? Did we really mean it and did we follow through on our words? It is not an easy task to evaluate ourselves. However, Jewish tradition tells us that as we begin a New Year, this is what it is all about, standing before G-d and examining our lives. Though it may seem very difficult to do, the Ramban reminds us that as long as there is a will within us to do repentance, to better our conduct, then it is not so difficult.

Rabbi Hayim David Halevi, a former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, in an essay on Teshuva states that there are some people who believe that as long as you have a mindset that you will be better in the year to come, this is adequate. If you feel a sense of remorse, of regret, or contrition in your heart, that is repentance. He disagrees and says that it must be translated into action. All the good thoughts that may be in your mind and the kind feelings in your heart - unless you enact them in your own life, they are really meaningless. And so regret, alone, is not enough. We must translate that contrition and that willingness to do better into real actions which make a difference.

Rabbi David Wolpe suggests that Teshuva is not merely returning to G-d or to one's best self, but it is the idea of returning to the world, away from the preoccupation of the self. Beating one's chest does not feed the hungry or comfort the bereaved. To really do Teshuva, each person has to recognize that the state of his soul is not the only thing that matters. Self-consciousness is half a step from self-absorption. In other words, we must translate our feelings into actions. When we are good people we contribute to make a better world. When we understand that repentance is possible, then we convey that change in our behavior to the world at-large. It is interesting to note that the Psalm that we read in a house of mourning and the Psalm that we read before the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana is one of those purportedly composed and sung by the Children of Korach. Perhaps this teaches us that they felt regret for their actions and then, actually, included it in their lifestyle and became the great Psalters, or singers, in the Temple. We recognize this lesson as we prepare to blow shofar at the beginning of the New Year. As we feel our own mortality and sit Shiva for a loved one, we recall the lessons of the sons. The great Chicago author, Saul Bellow, once wrote: "Repent means now, this minute and forever... I'm not religious or anything like that, but I know I don't have to be next year what I was last year. I've been at one end and I can get to the other."

This is the message of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We can, we should and, in fact, we must be better this year than we were this past one. All of us can improve. All of us can be better people. And with that, we make a better world. It is difficult to examine our weaknesses and be truthful about our foibles, but it is a necessary part of being a mature human being. The Ramban teaches us that it is not so far removed from us that we can never attain it. The Sons of Korach and the grandchildren of Haman teach us that everything is possible. Saul Bellow reminds us that the time is now and forever.

Like the Habsburg monarch who died, we are now stripped of all of our titles and all of our pretenses, on these days we recognize our own mortality. But, it is also on

these days that we are encouraged by our tradition to do Teshuva, to repent, to return, to be the people that we can be and, in doing so, create a world which will be blessed by our conduct and made richer by our lives.