

The Rosh Hashanah experience, done well, is all about the journey to Teshuvah, repentance. Stephen Post wrote about an incident in his book *When Good Things Happen to Good People* that very well illustrates the journey we begin today. He writes:

Most lives, mine included, are on a steep learning curve when it comes to generosity and giving. Last year I missed my flight from New York to Cleveland and had to take the Trailways bus home so I could teach my class the next morning. It was a sweltering summer night and the bus's air-conditioning was broken. The driver heaved to his feet and said apologetically, "We can leave, but I warn you, you're all gonna be warm tonight." He was right – I was about to be warmed in body and soul.

Behind me was a man with mild Down syndrome... I desperately wanted to sleep that night, but about every 15 minutes the young man tapped me hesitantly on the shoulder and asked:

"Are we in Cleveland yet?"

And I would answer, "No, we'll be traveling most of the night."

At the same time, the man in front of me – who was cognitively intact – was in rage. Every so often he would rise up from his seat and pound the ceiling on the bus furiously, as if he were a trapped prisoner and could somehow punch through the metal and escape. He'd yell, "Why is it so damned hot in here? Why is the bus so slow? Why can't the guy back there shut up?" He had two young sons with him, and each time he exploded in rage they'd shrink back instinctively in their seats, gazing up at him in fear. One of the boys would start to cry silently, and the other would follow in suit. The bus driver would stop the bus, ask the man to calm down, and we'd resume traveling – and if I was lucky enough to start to nod off, the inevitable tap came on my shoulder. I'd turn around and there was my Down friend, somehow looking like a grown-up version of those two boys, with his wide, childlike stare. He needed reassurance.

We finally got to Milesburg, Pennsylvania, a little town in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains. The bus pulled into a parking lot, ground to a stop, and the driver turned off the engine. He then firmly escorted the man and his children off the bus and refused to let them back on. We resumed our journey, and the remaining four hours were, of course, punctuated by my Down friend's hesitant tapping:

"Are we in Cleveland yet?"

"No, we're not there yet, but we will be soon."

At 6:30 am the bus finally reached Cleveland and we disembarked. My young friend followed me and tapped me on the shoulder one last time. Then, with the typical uninhibited effusiveness one often finds in the mildly [cognitively impaired], he gave me a big hug.

"We are here! Good night," he beamed.

A good night indeed. I often drive by Milesburg on Route 80, and every time I pass that town I remember two men on a bus. One man was cognitively intact, but he chose rage, again and again, until he and his unfortunate sons were left in a parking lot... The other man was cognitively impaired and needy, but he was remarkably loving. In giving to him, I received back – great joy and thanks. I'm glad I took that bus.

When the Israelites were held in slavery in Egypt, the Torah says, “**The Israelites cried out to God**” (cf. Ex. 2:23). Reb Avraham Weinberg of the Slonimer Hasidic tradition says that this was a cry without words, for they had not yet attained the capacity of speech.

Stephen Post sat between two men - one who cried out in rage, having lost his capacity for reasonable speech; and one who lacked the cognition and the words to express the fear and loneliness of the journey, and therefore repeated one question over and over again. This was the experience of being in Egypt, in slavery, trapped on a hot bus.

Reb Avraham continues, “When the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt the blessed Holy One gave them the Pesah,” which he reads as *peh sach* (a mouth that speaks). The numerical value of *sach* is 68, equal to *Chayyim*. This signifies that they were given the power of speech so that they could speak before God with vitality (*chayyut*).” [Birakat Avraham - Behar]

The bus arriving at its destination, the passengers disembarking, was the redemption from the Egypt of an oppressively hot ride. The angry man never made it to the promised land of Cleveland, but the young man with Down Syndrome expressed his gratitude and love and joy at arriving at their destination with tremendous vitality, a great hug. It was the expression of the Israelites in the wilderness finally able to sing again, feeling the chains of oppression slip away.

After an intense experience, we have a certain power of speech. We are charged up and enlightened by the experience. We want to talk about it, retell the story. I’m thinking of something like the experience of the Tigers winning the World Series or the Red Wings winning the Stanley Cup. Have I ever told you about being at the Metrodome in Minneapolis when the Twins beat St. Louis in game seven of the 1987 World Series? Maybe another time.

Let’s imagine, for the moment, that the power of being in this community, riding on the Rosh Hashanah bus, is a kind of religious experience for you. Perhaps not as great as the Tigers in the World Series, but maybe close! It may be the history of the congregation, the building, the family connections, the people who are sitting with you, but there is something about sitting together, here, today, that is compelling.

The problem with an intense religious experience is that the energy of the experience dissipates. No religious experience, no matter how powerful, remains forever. The memory and power of the experience fades over time. The memory of this Rosh Hashanah experience of teshuvah fades. On Yom Kippur, we speak about the gates of teshuvah, gates of repentance, closing.

The major work of Rosh Hashanah happens during the hours that you are in the synagogue. Many Jewish holidays are primarily centered in the home. RH and YK are different - the synagogue service is the central means to celebrate the holiday. More than any other holiday, people flock to the synagogue to celebrate in a community, knowingly or unknowingly, because the very nature of teshuvah requires that we exercise our power of speech to articulate both what went wrong and what went right in the past year. We use the power of speech to identify the things that we need to work on. In a way, we are making a public commitment to do the work of teshuvah

Teshuvah requires the ability to articulate precisely what it is that you need to change. The power of speech gives us the ability to put an experience into words that we and others can understand. We know that when we resolve to do something but keep the resolution a secret, we may or may not actually do it. But when we share our resolution publicly and others hold us

accountable for making progress, that we are much more likely to succeed. A vow to ourselves lacks power and accountability. A vow taken before family and friends and acquaintances is serious.

We promise today to work on our inner qualities to change our patterns of behavior. The work of teshuvah is a work of purification of our middot, our inner qualities. [Rabbi Jonathan Slater] This is the work that Rabbi Israel Salanter, dean of the mussar movement, proposed is the essential work of being a Jew - to work on emphasizing positive qualities and removing negative qualities, transforming them into positive ones.

The High Holiday liturgy focuses on God's 13 attributes from Exodus 34:6-7. Mussar suggests that we study those attributes in order to internalize them, make them part of our own qualities.

“Adonai! Adonai! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.” [Exodus 34:6-7]

The work of teshuvah consists of a focused effort to examine the qualities embedded in this verse and activate them in our personal behavior. The strength of the Ahavas Israel family depends on the good qualities of each of its members. I ask you to consider making some of the following commitments, derived from the 13 attributes:

- to work on stable relationships with family and friends, even if at times they act thoughtlessly, and
- not to abandon friendships and family just because they do something that we think is foolish.
- to behave with compassion
- to give the benefit of the doubt, and
- not to assume ill intent.
- to be patient and slow to anger, and to act in a loving way, even to those who don't deserve love.
- to be faithful, and to stand by our family and those who have been our friends.
- to show appreciation.
- not to bear a grudge, to those who have hurt us accidentally, to those who acted against us intentionally, and even to those who act maliciously.
- to accept a person's apology and consider the slate wiped clean. We consider the reconstruction of broken relationships to be a fundamental value.

We have all gotten aboard the Ahavas Israel Rosh Hashanah bus today. We now decide, in the ride from here to next year, are we going to be the kind of person whose anger gets us thrown off the bus, or the kind of person whose patient and loving nature comforts our fellow passenger.

- Are we going to support our fellow passengers when they are experiencing darkness?
- Are we going to be forgiving when our fellow riders tap us on the shoulder one too many times?
- Are we going to contribute our time and energy and financial resources to this community to ensure its safe arrival when the Rosh Hashanah journey ends?

May you get to know your fellow passengers on this bus ride. May you give and receive joy and thanks. I hope you're glad you got on this bus - May your ride towards teshuvah, repentance, be a pleasant experience.