Can We Change? The Psychodynamics of Teshuvah

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The *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe) offer a vision of hope: we are not what we were but what we aspire to be. By reflecting on our past in the light of Torah, we distinguish between what we are and what we do. The Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks, explores the psycho-dynamics of *teshuvah* below; this process of change offers us an empowering capacity to choose, to change and to change the world.

Some years ago I was preparing to make a television documentary on the state of the family. My research took me in unexpected directions, one of which was an encounter with a speech therapist who taught me something that altered my whole understanding of human nature.

Her work had led her to the view that to cure speech dysfunctions among children, one had to look not only at the child but also at the whole network of relationships within the family. When a child had a speech defect, it affected the interactions between family members. It followed - so she argued - that if you wanted to cure the defect, you also had to renegotiate family relationships. For the child to change, everyone else in its immediate circle had to be prepared to change. At a certain level, speech therapy became family therapy.

Working with the parents of children with speech handicaps, she had to get them to understand the nature of their child's affliction and the difficulty it faced in breaking free of it. She made them undergo the following experiment. First she told the parents to visualise the object that was most precious to them - the thing from which they would least like to be parted. Then she told them to imagine that they had just lost it - and to describe their feelings. Each of them went through the pain of loss - from panic to a sense of deep sadness. Then she said: 'Now you know what your child will feel like if it loses its speech defect.'

It was a moment of total bewilderment. The parents had, until that moment, assumed that their child *wanted* to be cured. After all, the children knew that they were suffering from a dysfunction that made it hard for them to communicate. It impeded all normal relationships. But - and this was the crucial 'but' - the defect had become part of their personalities. They had learned to cope. Their speech impediment had become part of their self-image. And so it was painful for them to change - even though they knew that it would be better for them if they did.

This was a revolutionary insight into one of the most deep-seated of all human anxieties - the *fear of change*. We can know that there is something wrong in our lives, but that knowledge is not in and of itself sufficient to move us to behave differently from here on. We cling to the familiar, even when we know it to be damaging or even self-destructive. That is why addiction is so hard to cure. To change, we have to overcome fear.

Freedom and Responsibility

That, for me, is the essential spiritual dynamic at the heart of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe that frame the ten 'Days of Repentance'. At the very beginning of the human story, as the Torah narrates it, is a metaphysical proposition of almost immeasurable consequences for the history of civilisation. *To be human is to be free.* We are not wholly a part of nature, governed by instinctual drives, neuro-physiological causes, or genetic determinism. For every act, however strongly we feel the urge to commit it, we can always stand back, judge it to be wrong, and refrain accordingly. This capacity is, as far as we know, unique to humans. It has to do with the ability to speak, think, conceptualise, imagine a world different from the one present to our senses, evaluate the relative merits of alternative acts and outcomes, form an intention and act accordingly. To be human is to be free.

The Torah sets this out in the form of a fateful speech by God to Kayin who has begun to harbour murderous feelings toward his brother Hevel. 'If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.' Kayin, as we know, fails the test. The human story begins with fratricide - as it has continued ever since. But the consequences of that failure are inescapable. Kayin can try to deny personal responsibility for the murder. He didn't know. It

wasn't him. He is not his brother's keeper. But the denial - essentially a form of self-deception - is ineffective. We are free; therefore we are responsible for what we do. In human freedom, the moral law is born. Without it we could have no concepts of right and wrong, virtue and vice, reward and punishment, merit and guilt. There would be no meaning to the idea of justice in human affairs. The entire moral universe is predicated on a single revolutionary axiom: that we are free to choose how to behave.

That axiom has been challenged in almost every generation. The ancient world saw man as subject to mysterious and irrational forces. Greek tragedy, most famously the story of Oedipus, is built on the idea of an inescapable fate that it is hubris to try to resist. Christianity - influenced by the writings of Paul, especially in the Epistle to the Romans - developed a pessimistic view of human behaviour. Mankind is under the curse of original sin. We try to act well, but repeatedly we fail. The very fact that we are commanded gives rise to an inclination to disobey that is overpowering. The good we do is dependent not on our will but on Divine grace.

More recently, determinisms of all kinds have been formulated to explain human conduct without reference to individual choice. For Spinoza the cause of our behaviour lies in nature; for Marx in social structures; for Freud in childhood conditioning; for socio-biologists in the drive of 'the selfish gene' to replicate itself. Each of these gives rise to a view of the human situation. For Spinoza, freedom lies in the consciousness of necessity - hence our proper response to the world should be a kind of Stoic acceptance. For Marx, it lies in revolution. We can only change people by changing the forces that operate on them. In its milder forms this is called 'social engineering'.

Judaism rejects all of these views as a denial of human dignity. We are not at the mercy of impersonal forces. We are not chaff blown by the wind. We are, each of us, the author of our own life. The proof is ... that we can change.

Teshuvah: The Test of Freedom

In the middle of his masterly exposition of the Laws of *Teshuvah*, Rambam devotes two chapters (5-6) to the subject of freewill. He calls it 'the pillar of the Torah and the commandments' (5:3). If we did not have freewill, he says, there could be no point to the commandments and no justice in the reward of the righteous or the punishment of the wicked.

The question is obvious. If freewill is so fundamental to Judaism, why did Rambam not include it in his list of the Thirteen Principles of the Faith? Why did he not expound it in the opening section of his law code dealing with 'The laws of the Foundation of the Torah'? The answer, it seems to me, is this. It is only in and through *teshuvah* that we find conclusive proof of the existence of freewill.

Here is Rambam's definition of perfect repentance:

> It occurs when an opportunity presents itself for repeating an offence, and the offender, while able to do so, nonetheless refrains because he is penitent and not out of fear or lack of strength. For instance, if a man had a forbidden relationship with a woman, and some time later he found himself alone with her - his passion for her still being strong, his physical strength unabated, and they are together in the same place as when he first committed the sin - but this time he desists and does not transgress: this is perfect repentance.

Now on any version of determinism, the cause determines the effect. Yet here are two situations in which the causes are the same but the effects are different. In the first case the man sinned. In the second he did not - proof that action is not determined by the situation. Something mysterious has intervened between cause and effect, namely human decision. The fact that we can change and grow in line with our developing moral insight is the single most convincing demonstration that we are indeed masters of our fate, writers of our own script. *Teshuvah* is an essential expression of the human spirit. The fact that it is possible tells us that we are not destined repeatedly to fail. Our fate is not pre-ordained. We can change the world because we can change ourselves.

Fear and Fearlessness

Yet - and this is what I learned from my encounter with the speech therapist - we often fear change even when we know that change is necessary. We rationalise. We make excuses. We blame others rather than admit that the responsibility is ours. We engage in the game that Erich Berne calls 'Yes, but'. We think of every conceivable reason why change is impossible. We find ourselves at the mercy of what Erich Fromm described as 'fear of freedom'.

Nowhere is this more tellingly described than in the story of the spies sent by Mosheh to search out the land. They saw a land flowing with milk and honey, exactly as Mosheh had promised. But they also saw, or claimed to have seen, what was not there. The people, they said, were giants while they were grasshoppers. The country was, they claimed, a 'land which consumed its inhabitants'.

None of this was factually true, as the Israelites discovered a generation later. What makes the story so realistic is that it is *psychologically* true. The Israelites were terrified by the prospect of change from slavery to liberty, from dependence to responsibility. The conquest of the land was militarily possible but psychologically impossible. The Israelites had not yet mastered the mentality of freedom. Their immediate response was an infantile regression to the

familiar, however harsh, rather than face the unfamiliar, however desirable. 'Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt.'

By contrast, in the *sidra* of *Behaalotecha*, the Torah tells a remarkable story of personal growth. Mosheh is faced by three challenges. First the people complain about the food. They have only manna. They want meat. Then, when Mosheh gathers around him seventy elders, Eldad and Medad prophesy within the camp, threatening his leadership. Finally Mosheh's own brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, make complaints about him.

There is an ascending order to these challenges. The first is routine. The people are dissatisfied, their usual condition. The second is more serious. It is, or seems to be, a direct assault on Mosheh's authority. The third is by far the worst. Mosheh comes under criticism from his own family.

Yet the reactions of Mosheh to these three events is in the opposite order. The first drives him to the very brink of despair. To the second he responds with calm generosity: 'Would that all God's people were prophets!' To the third he goes further still and prays on behalf of Miriam, the very person who had launched an attack on him. As the crises grow greater, so Mosheh grows in stature until the man we see at the end of the *sidra* is no longer the person we saw at the beginning.

I find this sequence inspirational and wholly in keeping with everything we know about Mosheh - the man who never declined a challenge, who never ceased to wrestle with a recalcitrant generation, the man of whom it is said that at the end of a long life 'his eyes were undimmed and his strength undiminished'. There is a truth here about the nature of personal growth. *We are as young as our capacity to change.* There are young people, fixed in their ways, who are already old. And there are people, advanced in years, who never cease to be open to new ideas, to be invigorated by new challenges. Such people, though their bodies age, never grow old.

Against the Self-Images of the Age

To be a Jew is to have the courage to be different, to be an iconoclast, to question the self-images of the age. Today's secular culture is one in which the concept of *teshuvah* - at least at a personal level - has become radically incoherent. Philip Reiff, in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, has diagnosed our era as one in which the biblical vision of moral striving has been replaced by an ethic of self-acceptance. We are what we are, and we should learn to love ourselves for what we are. The thing we should never feel - the thing we should cure ourselves from feeling - is guilt. From self-acceptance comes self-esteem. Therefore we should never judge ourselves; still less should we judge others.

I find this a desperately shallow view of human life. It denies, at the most basic level, the dignity of human beings as self-transforming agents. It invites us to engage in systematic self-deception. It encourages us to see ourselves as victims of forces we cannot control. It discourages us from using 'that one talent which is death to hide', namely our capacity to choose and therefore to grow. It invites us to accept what can and should be changed. Despite its modernity, the therapeutic culture is actually very ancient indeed: it is the culture of ancient Greece and the Delphic oracle, of fate and the acceptance of inevitability in human affairs. It is a frame of mind that begins in denial and ends in despair. It is capitulation to the fear of freedom which is the fear of change.

The *Yamim Noraim* offer an altogether different vision of the scope of human possibility. We are not what we were but what we aspire to be. By reflecting on our past in the light of Torah we distinguish between what we are and what we do. Regret, remorse, repentance, atonement - these things tell us that our future can be different from our past. We can change. We are not destined endlessly to replay earlier scenarios. As soon as I say 'I have sinned', I experience the freedom that comes from the knowledge that I can act differently next time. The chapter I am about to write in the book of life can be radically different from what came before.

What then of the fear of change, the fear that - according to my friend, the speech therapist - locks us in to dysfunctional behaviour? I can overcome it because when it comes to *teshuvah* I know that I am not alone. On these holiest of days the Divine presence is with me. God does not ask us to be perfect. He knows that 'there is none so righteous on earth that they do only good and never sin'. He asks of us only that we acknowledge our mistakes and learn from them. Indeed if we never made mistakes we would never learn. From the errors of our past - so long as we candidly acknowledge them to be errors - we become morally more mature than we might otherwise have been. 'Through *teshuvah*, sins become merits', meaning that it is precisely through our failures that we acquire strength of character as we develop the courage to overcome them. On the *Yamim Noraim* God is present not only as a king (*Malkenu*), but also as a parent wanting His children to fulfil their potential (*Avinu*). That is why, on these days, He not only judges but also forgives.

A world without judgement is also a world without forgiveness. That is the secular world in which we live. As I argued in my Rosh Hashanah television programme last year, today's counterparts to the Ten Commandments are remorseless and unforgiving. 'Thou shalt not fail.' 'Thou shalt not be unemployed.' 'Thou shalt not be plain.' 'Thou shalt not be unable to afford.'

The contemporary media set before us a world of glittering

prizes, most of which we know we will be unable to attain. In place of Avraham and Sarah, Mosheh and Miriam, our current role models are businessmen of unimaginable wealth, sportsmen of unparalleled fitness and supermodels of unattainable beauty. These are people we are invited to admire but which most of us know we will never be. So we inhabit a world of fantasy instead of a world of reality. The moral universe in which we are judged by our efforts is replaced by a social order in which the determinant is luck. No wonder that the symbol of our age is the National Lottery.

The Love That Says No

One of the most powerful experiences I ever had was a day I spent in a rehabilitation centre for teenage heroin addicts. Again I was making a television programme, and I was searching for a way to communicate to a secular, non-Jewish audience the concept of *teshuvah*. It seemed to me that the closest analogy was the curing of addiction. It too required the addict to regret the past, recognise the need for change, and find the inner resources to become a new person. I found my time with the teenagers moving and illuminating. All of them had come from dysfunctional families. Most had a history of child abuse. They were struggling to put together the broken pieces of their lives.

I asked the director of the centre, a young woman, what it was that she provided for the teenagers that gave them the strength to change. I will never forget her answer. 'Two things', she said. 'For most of them, this is the first place they have experienced unconditional love. And it is the first time they have met someone who cares enough about them to say No.' Her words shone with spiritual insight. Suddenly I knew that this is the nature of our encounter with God on Yom Kippur. God loves us unconditionally. And He cares enough about us to say No.

Unconditional love is not non-judgemental. If it were, then we would leave people to be the way they are. We would leave addicts to their addiction, depressives to their depression, the vulnerable to their vulnerability. That is not love but indifference. Real love - the love of a parent for a child - is a wish to see someone become what we know they could be. That is what God wishes for us, and it is the idea at the heart of *teshuvah*. On the Days of Awe God helps us overcome our fear of change by inviting us to acknowledge our failures, affirming our worth despite it all, and by being with us as we take our first faltering steps towards becoming the person we aspire to be.

This whole cluster of ideas - freedom, responsibility, judgement, repentance, forgiveness, moral growth - is radically at odds with our contemporary view of the nature of humanity and society. So be it. Ours was a counter-cultural faith in the past. It will continue to be so long into the future. *Teshuvah* remains the single most empowering idea in the history of mankind's view of itself. Because we can judge we can choose. Because we can choose we can change. And because we can change ourselves we can change the world. The journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is the discovery of freedom, which is nothing less than the genesis of hope.