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Kol Nidre
September 20, 2026

Teshuva Revisited

A man is released from prison after nineteen years. He has nowhere to go. No inn will give him a room. No one trusts him. He carries papers identifying him as a former convict, which means that everywhere he goes, his past arrives before he does. Finally, an elderly bishop takes him in. He feeds him. Gives him a bed. Treats him with a dignity he has not experienced in years. And how does he repay him? He steals the bishop's silver. The police catch him and bring him back.

Some of you probably recognize the story by now. The man is Jean Valjean, from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.[1] It is my favorite musical. I've seen it five times. And apparently this is the night you learn that if you happened to spy on me when no one else is around, there is a decent chance you would hear me singing "Red and Black."

Who knew?

Anyway, back to the story.

When the police return Valjean to the bishop's home, everyone expects the obvious outcome. The bishop will identify the stolen silver. Valjean will go back to prison. Instead, the bishop tells the police there has been a misunderstanding. The silver wasn't stolen, he tells them. It was a gift.

And then he does something even more extraordinary. He gives Valjean two silver candlesticks as well. The police leave. And the bishop essentially tells him: Use this gift to become an honest man.

And that raises the question that matters to me tonight.

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[1] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (1862). The opening portion of the novel recounts Jean Valjean's release after nineteen years of imprisonment, his encounter with Bishop Myriel, his theft of the bishop's silver, and the bishop's act of mercy that becomes a turning point in Valjean's life. Much of my understanding of the story comes from the stage adaptation.

What would it actually take for Jean Valjean to become someone new? Because receiving a second chance is one thing. Becoming a different person is another.

For the rest of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo tries to answer that question. And so does Judaism.

We call it *teshuvah*.

Usually we translate *teshuvah* as repentance. Sometimes as return. At this time of year we talk about it constantly: recognizing where we have gone wrong and trying to do better. All important.

But a few weeks ago, while teaching my conversion class, we came across something in Maimonides' laws of *teshuvah* that stopped us. Maimonides begins with the steps we would expect: stop doing what you know is wrong, regret having done it, resolve not to repeat it, and confess aloud what you have done.[2]

But then he keeps going.

Maimonides says that among the paths of *teshuvah* are giving *tzedakah*, distancing yourself from whatever caused you to miss the mark, and changing your behavior entirely. And then he says something that caught all of our attention.

Change your name. And leave where you live.

More precisely, Maimonides says a person should change their name, as if to say, "I am different, not the person who did those deeds." And then he says a person should go into exile from their place, because leaving one's familiar surroundings can humble a person.[3]

At that point, our class discussion became considerably more interesting. Apparently, if things have gone particularly badly for you this year, Maimonides has a plan. Change your name and move.

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[2] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:2.

[3] ibid. 2:4.

I'm not sure how Nicole would feel if I came home tomorrow and announced that from now on I'd like to be called Mordechai and that we're moving to Spokane. And, to be fair, I'm not entirely sure that's what Maimonides had in mind. But the more we talked about this strange teaching, the more profound it seemed. Because Maimonides understood something about human behavior more than 800 years ago that we still struggle to accept:

It is very difficult to become a different person while changing absolutely nothing about the way we live.

Think again about Jean Valjean. He does almost exactly what Maimonides describes. He changes his name. He moves. He creates a new life. Under a new identity, he becomes a successful businessman and eventually the mayor of a town. He uses his wealth to care for others, repeatedly risks himself for people in need, and ultimately devotes his life to raising Cosette, Fantine's orphaned daughter.

The bishop gives Valjean the opportunity to become someone new. But Valjean still has to become that person. The candlesticks don't do it for him. He has to construct a different life. And maybe that is the part of *teshuvah* we do not talk about enough.

We say we want to change. And we mean it. We really do. I'm going to be more patient. I'm going to spend less time staring at my phone. I'm going to stop gossiping. I'm going to be more present with my family. I'm not going to let that person get under my skin anymore. And then tomorrow morning we wake up in exactly the same place. We pick up exactly the same phone. We follow exactly the same routine. We interact with the same people. We encounter the same triggers. And somehow we expect ourselves to become different.

Maimonides seems to be saying: Maybe that's not how change works. Maybe you don't have to change your name. Maybe you don't have to move. But you probably have to change something.

We often say that *teshuvah* means "return." Return to God. Return to the person we know we can be. But perhaps there is a strange truth at the

heart of *teshuvah*: Sometimes, in order to return, we have to leave something behind. Maybe we have to leave behind a habit. Maybe we have to leave behind the need to win every argument. Maybe we have to leave our phone in another room. Maybe we have to leave behind the group of people with whom every conversation eventually becomes gossip. Maybe we have to change the circumstances that make it so easy to keep doing the very thing we claim we want to stop doing.

Or maybe what we need to leave behind isn't a place or a person at all. Maybe it's a story we've been telling ourselves for years: This is just who I am. I'm stubborn. I'm impatient. I don't apologize. I hold grudges. I don't talk about my feelings. Because if this is simply who I am, then I don't really have to change. I can regret what I did. I can apologize for it. I can feel guilty about it. But what can I do? That's just me.

Judaism says: No.

That may be who you have been. It does not have to be who you become. And that is much harder than saying we're sorry.

An apology can be part of *teshuvah*. Regret can be part of *teshuvah*. Standing here tonight beating our chests can be part of *teshuvah*. But Maimonides would want to know: What happens next Thursday? What happens when you encounter the same situation again?

Your teenager says the thing that drives you crazy. Your spouse pushes the button they have somehow located with extraordinary precision after all these years. Your coworker sends the email. Your parent makes the comment. Someone says something that immediately puts you on the defensive.

What happens then?

Because that is where *teshuvah* becomes real. Not here. Out there. Not while the lights are dimmed, the music is beautiful, and all of us are thinking about becoming better people. Next week. When we're tired. When we're irritated. When nobody is watching. When we have every opportunity to do exactly what we've always done.

Maimonides teaches that complete *teshuvah* occurs when we encounter essentially the same circumstances in which we previously went wrong, have the opportunity to repeat the behavior, and this time choose differently because we ourselves have changed.[4]

Same situation. Same temptation. Same opportunity. Different response.

That's change.

Rabbi Shefa Gold hears another possibility in the word *teshuvah*. Alongside "return," she hears "response." She teaches that responsibility is the freedom to respond wisely rather than remaining enslaved to our patterns of reaction.[5]

Reaction and response. They sound almost identical. But they're not. Reaction is automatic. Response involves choice. Someone criticizes me. I become defensive. Someone hurts me. I withdraw. Someone challenges me. I attack. Someone disagrees with me. I stop listening.

We all have our reactions. And many of them are so deeply ingrained that we don't even recognize them as choices anymore. Maybe *teshuvah* begins in the tiny space between what happens to us and what we do next. That brief moment when I recognize: I know what I usually do here. I know what I am about to say. I know exactly where this conversation is going. And then I stop. And I choose something different.

And perhaps that is what Maimonides is really trying to make possible with his strange advice. Change your name. Leave your familiar surroundings. Get away from the things that cause you to stumble. Create some space between the person you have been and the person you are trying to become. Because sometimes sheer willpower isn't enough.

If I know that when I am exhausted I become short-tempered with the people I love, perhaps my *teshuvah* isn't simply apologizing afterward. Maybe I need to change something about the way I am living. Because if I

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[4] ibid. 2:1.

[5] Rabbi Shefa Gold, "Facing the Music: A High Holiday Meditation" (2000).

keep making the same mistake in the same circumstances year after year, maybe the problem isn't that I haven't felt guilty enough. Maybe I haven't changed anything.

There is another obstacle to change: sometimes we are much better at seeing what is wrong with everyone else. A teaching attributed to the Baal Shem Tov says that when we see another person doing something ugly—when someone's behavior really bothers us—we should look for some trace of that same quality within ourselves.[6] I don't particularly like this teaching because I greatly prefer identifying *your* character defects. I'm pretty good at it. Most of us are. He's arrogant. She's selfish. He never listens. She always has to be right. And the Baal Shem Tov essentially says: Interesting. Why does that particular quality bother you so much?

Now, this teaching has limits. Sometimes another person's behavior really is about them. Cruelty is cruelty. Abuse is abuse. Injustice needs to be confronted. Judaism does not ask us to turn someone else's wrongdoing into an exercise in self-criticism. But sometimes the person who drives us crazy is holding up a mirror. Sometimes what we find intolerable in someone else bears an uncomfortable resemblance to something within ourselves. And if *teshuvah* requires change, we first have to be willing to see what needs changing.

That may be one reason Yom Kippur is so difficult. It is much easier to identify what everyone else should change. Tonight Judaism asks us to stop doing that. For twenty-five hours. No one else's soul is our responsibility tonight. Only our own.-Not my spouse's soul. Not my child's soul. Not my parent's soul. Not the soul of the person whose politics make me crazy. Mine.

What is the pattern I keep repeating? What do I continue to do even though I know where it leads? What do I keep saying I want to change while arranging my life so that I never actually have to change it? What am I still

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[6] A teaching attributed to the Baal Shem Tov urges a person who sees an ugly quality in another to examine whether some manifestation of that same fault exists within oneself and to allow the encounter to prompt *teshuvah*.

carrying that I know I need to put down? And perhaps the hardest question: What would I actually have to change in order to change?

At the end of the Mishnah's discussion of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Akiva offers one of the most hopeful images in our tradition. After all the talk about sin and responsibility and repentance, Rabbi Akiva says: "Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you made clean, and who makes you clean?" He points to Jeremiah's description of God as *mikveh Yisrael*—the hope of Israel—but Rabbi Akiva hears another meaning in the word *mikveh*…A *mikveh*. Just as a *mikveh* purifies those who enter its waters, Rabbi Akiva says, so does the Holy One purify Israel.[7]

I've been thinking about that image differently this year. I have had the privilege many times of standing beside people at the moment they become Jewish. For someone becoming Jewish, the *mikveh* marks a very real transformation. A person enters the water carrying everything that came before. Their history doesn't disappear. Their family doesn't disappear. Their memories don't disappear. The person they have been does not suddenly cease to exist. But something changes.

They immerse. They emerge. And something fundamental has changed. They are Jewish. And, as part of becoming Jewish, they take a Hebrew name. A new name. There it is again. Change your name. Not because the old person has been erased. Not because everything that came before was somehow meaningless. But because we have a ritual language for acknowledging that a human being can cross a threshold and emerge with a new identity.

Rabbi Akiva, of course, is not talking about conversion. He is talking about Yom Kippur and our relationship with God. But those of us who have witnessed a conversion—or experienced one ourselves—may hear his image differently. Because a *mikveh* is not simply about washing something away. It marks transition. Before and after. The person who emerges is still

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[7] *Mishnah Yoma* 8:9, citing Ezekiel 36:25 and Jeremiah 17:13. Rabbi Akiva concludes the Mishnah's discussion of Yom Kippur: "Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you made clean, and who makes you clean?" He compares God's purification of Israel to the purifying waters of a *mikveh*.

entirely connected to the person who entered. And yet something is different.

Maybe that is what we are hoping for on Yom Kippur too. Not that our mistakes magically disappear. Not that tomorrow morning we emerge as entirely different human beings. But that transformation remains possible. That we can enter these twenty-five hours carrying one version of ourselves and emerge ready to live a slightly different one.

And there is one more thing about the *mikveh*. You have to go into the water yourself. Someone can guide you. Someone can stand beside you. But nobody can immerse for you. And nobody can make *teshuvah* for us either. Jean Valjean had the bishop. The bishop opened a door. But Valjean had to walk through it.

Yom Kippur opens that same door for us tonight. There are things we carry that we don't need to carry anymore. Habits. Anger. Resentments. Excuses. Stories about ourselves. Things we have outgrown but haven't yet put down.

So perhaps Maimonides' advice isn't quite so ridiculous after all. Change your name. Leave your place. Become someone different. Maybe we don't have to take him literally. But tonight we should take him seriously. What do I need to leave behind? What needs to be different when I wake up tomorrow—and next week, and next month—if I genuinely want to become different? What would it mean to stop saying, "That's just who I am"?

That is the extraordinary promise Judaism makes to every one of us tonight. You are not trapped by who you have been. You are not condemned to repeat every pattern. You are not finished.

Teshuvah means the story is not over.

Jean Valjean could not undo nineteen years in prison. He could not undo stealing the bishop's silver. But he could decide what he would do with the candlesticks he was given. We cannot undo this past year either. We cannot take back every word. We cannot unmake choices. We cannot go backward. But we can decide what happens next.

Sometimes, in order to return, we have to leave something behind. So no, you probably don't have to change your name. You probably don't have to move. But something has to change. And on this night, Judaism asks each of us to decide what that something needs to be.

G'mar chatimah tovah.