PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE
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When I as a kid, I thought the High Holy Days were a surefire system to becoming a better person. According to my model, I would atone for my mistakes from the previous year, learn my lessons, and resolve to do better. And so, year by year, I would improve as a human being. Gradually, I'd eliminate the holes in my game. I'd become kinder, more generous, more forgiving, more courageous, more humble, more everything. With each successive year, I'd be a better person.

This year I turned 56 years old. If things had worked as I imagined back then, by the time I reached this stage of life I should pretty much have nailed this thing. By now, I should have become a totally perfect human being.

But alas, no such luck. I am as far from perfection now as I was 50 years ago. In fact, sometimes I think I used to be a *better* person than I am now – that I used to be less cynical, less sarcastic, less ironic; I used to be more hopeful, more idealistic, more passionate, more sensitive. At the very least, my batting average as a human being has fluctuated over time.

So what's wrong with that model of *teshuvah* I had as a kid, a playbook for human change which seems so logical? Shouldn't we learn from our mistakes and, eventually, become less likely to repeat them? Shouldn't we just get wiser and better over time?

As we all know, this model is far from foolproof, and it certainly doesn't work in a vacuum. For one thing, human nature gets in the way. We have a powerful inclination to deny behaviors which reflect badly on us, to repress the darker aspects of ourselves. Because we would rather ignore our "shadow side," we develop blind spots about ourselves which, over time, become ever larger and more dangerous. Instead of progressive improvement, we repeat the same patterns, falling prey to the same habits of defensiveness or self-righteousness.

Here we are, poised once again to begin a new year – and honestly, do we really expect that in a year, we'll have made a lot of progress? Will we – can we -- really be better people this year? Our track record is not so promising.

So what can we do? How might we actually break the behavioral ruts we have dug over the years, and substitute different ways of being and acting? Last year, I suggested that if you boil **Judaism down, it's essentially a practice of waking up to reality, meeting the truth of our lives on a moment by moment basis.** God's question to Adam and Eve, the prototypical human beings -- "*ayeka*, where are you?" -- is an eternal question we each face throughout life.

The Torah teaches that the appropriate response is "*hineini*, I am here – I am fully present and aware in this moment." In today and tomorrow's Torah readings, Hagar and Abraham each awaken from denial and distraction. They become fully aware of what is happening in the moment and discover unexpected resources which save the lives of their sons Ishmael and Isaac -- a well of water, and a ram stuck in a thorn bush

Step one in changing ourselves is simply paying attention, noticing what is happening within and around us at any given moment. When we are spiritually drowsy or distracted, we operate on automatic pilot. Our words and our actions are reactive,

unconsciously driven by emotions. Old hurts and wounds can lead us to live in a state of anxiety and fear that our wants and needs can't or won't be met.

For instance, I might lash out at people I love when really I'm just anxious or resentful about something or someone else. I may be ungenerous with someone because I unconsciously identify them with someone else who has hurt me. I may gossip about someone out of my own insecurity. I may speak over others in a group because I'm afraid that if I don't, no one will notice me. I may insist on being right because in my shame, I equate being wrong with being worthless. I may involuntarily fudge the truth or even lie so others won't see my faults.

Each of us has a shadow we rarely, if ever, reveal to others or even to ourselves. Each of us has intrinsic drives to protect ourselves which, left unmonitored, can lead to actions which can hurt ourselves or others, even those we love most. Each of us has the capacity for self-centered behavior. Each of has the capacity to lie to conceal our imperfections. Each of us carries resentments of which we may be unaware, which poison our actions and our souls. Each of us has within us, as the rabbis taught, a *yetzer hara*, a devotion to total self-service which, unchecked, can drive our large and small daily behaviors.

If we have any hope of changing, we must start by acknowledging the reality of this *yetzer hara,* most frequently translated as "evil inclination." But we can more instructively understand our *yetzer hara* as when we give ourselves over entirely to self-interest, when we act from our sense that the world was created for our sake – and ONLY for our sake.

When we jockey for position at the subway turnstile or bus stop or buffet line, when we cut people off on the sidewalk or the highway, that's our *yetzer hara* whispering that we're the only ones who matter, and everyone else is just an obstacle in our way. When, instead of listening to what others are saying, we're think about what we want to say, or when we interrupt someone while they are still finishing their thought, our *yetzer hara* is saying the only thing that really matters is what's on our mind. When we hesitate to give to *tzedakah* because we're worrying about paying for something for our self, our *yetzer hara* is warning us that our needs trump everything else.

Our *yetzer hara* runs on fuel generated by our old wounds, which produce waves of pain and fear and unhealthy shame. When we're unaware of these emotions, they can seize control of the steering wheel -- and the results are not pretty. My *yetzer hara* wins out when I act entitled, because I've been hurt or disappointed in the past. My *yetzer hara* wins out when I'm self-righteous because I'm secretly afraid that I'm actually inferior to others whom I judge. My *yetzer hara* wins out when I gossip about others for human foibles I secretly fear I share, and when I blame or shame others for mistakes of which I'm also guilty. The *yetzer hara* is a kind of spiritual cancer, a tumor on the soul, obscuring the light within us.

The *yetzer hara* is having a field day in today's Torah portion. Sarah's jealousy and fear that her precious son Isaac will have to share a blessing with Hagar's son Ishmael leads her to demand her maid's expulsion from the home. In her mind, there is only room for one blessing in the family – and it's reserved for her son. Abraham's anxiety to dispel Sarah's anger and fear leads him to evict his first-born son Ishmael with Hagar, and send them off to certain death in the wilderness without enough food and water. Hagar's anger and pain over her treatment, and her fear for Ishmael's life, makes her selfishly abandon her child to cry at a distance, and blinds her to the nearby well of water that could save both her life and her son's.

Today's story seems devoid of any generosity of means and spirit. Each character acts as if it's all about him or her, closing their hearts to the legitimate needs of others. It could be a page out of the New York Times, where every day we read about the *yetzer hara* running rampant, corroding the soul of our society. More than ever in the current atmosphere of economic fear, our leaders bow to powerful, narrow interests rather than looking out for the greater good. Fearful of never having enough, we compulsively extract fossil fuels from the earth, blindly disregarding the long-term impact on future generations. We squander food resources while hundreds of thousand starve to death. We support wars which require extreme sacrifices of others, never of ourselves.

Some people think of morality as an exercise in reason. They argue that morals are in decline because some people never received or haven't been exposed to an ethical framework. They assume that morality is a formula in which one only has to clarify values, weigh consequences, and make the right decision. But even for those of us who claim to have a moral framework, how often do we nevertheless fail to do what we know is right? How often do we let our underlying anxiety override what is right, and choose the path that is best for *us*, not for others or the greater good?

Most of our moral failures don't arise from not knowing what to do – they come from shutting our eyes, ears, and hearts to the needs and the pain of others. When we fudge the truth to protect ourselves, it's a moral failure. When we blame others for conflict rather than examine our own part in it, that's a moral failure. When we judge others for faults we'd rather not condemn in ourselves, that's a moral failure. When we fail to act against wars to which most of us would never send our own children, that's a moral failure. When we accept policies based on naked self-interest and ignore the pain of those at the bottom of the ladder, that's a moral failure. When we exploit our beleaguered planet to meet our bloated appetites and shut our eyes to disastrous consequences for our children, grandchildren and beyond, that's a moral failure.

The question of moral living today is whether we will train our hearts to be open and our eyes to see the needs of those beyond us. The question of moral living is whether we will pay a little less attention to our ego, and little more attention to our soul.

Mordecai Kaplan argued that human beings have an innate need to experience ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves. That's why Reconstructionism places a premium on belonging, above the need for religious belief. This approach teaches that we can counter our *yetzer hara*, our fear-based self-centeredness, by remembering that while the world was created for my sake, it also was created for the sake of everyone else – that while each of us is infinitely precious, we are also an infinitely small aspect of a reality far beyond our imagination.

A synagogue can be like a club – an association of Jews sharing an affinity for our shared culture. For some of us, that's enough. We don't ask for more. Being part of the club helps us feel part of something larger. And remembering our place in the larger scheme of things sometimes saves us from those small and large selfish words and actions which cause embarrassment and regret. But for some of us -- and for me -- a synagogue must aim a lot higher. It must help each of us realize our potential to be more compassionate, more empathic, more hopeful, more courageous, more just human beings.

We at West End like to call ourselves a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community. And the work of holiness, however we understand it, doesn't come easily. It's a tough, daily grind. It's a practice – a spiritual practice requiring us to know ourselves and each other intimately. It requires **a community that feels safe enough to honestly confess our struggles with our**

own shadow , our own demons, our own *yetzer* hara. It demands that we **build enough trust among us to speak the truth to each other**, with compassionate and love. It requires us to **illuminate each other's blind spots, encourage each other** to overcome our baser instincts, and follow what Lincoln described as "the better angels of our nature."

This year, we're conducting a great experiment at West End Synagogue. Our theme for 5772 is the cultivation of *middot* – spiritual and ethical traits which we as Reconstructionist Jews might call "qualities of godliness." Each month we will study some key *middot*, such as *anavah* or humility, *kavod* or healthy self-regard, *chesed* or compassion, *emet* or truthfulness, *nedivut* or generosity, *tzedek* or justice. But this process isn't a lecture class or a seminar – it is a lab held every day in which we will practice these *middot* -- and I do mean practice, not perfect. We'll admit our struggles and failures. We'll catch each other's slips and applaud each other's successes. Our focus on *middot* this year is not to learn about humility, compassion, generosity, honesty and justice; we all aspire to these qualities. Instead, our focus will be on using these *middot* to loosen, even a little, the grip of our egos – our need to be right, to put our needs first, to impress others, to "get mine."

Each of us can take on the challenge of practicing these *middot,* to try to do better in some aspect of our daily lives. You may want to just take a moment now to focus on one of these qualities, and commit yourself to noticing the way you might practice it today, tomorrow and throughout the year. For those of us for whom West End is a significant aspect of our lives, this practice gives us the chance not only to work on ourselves, but to address those aspects of our community about which we *kvetch* most, the parts of which we are least proud. We hope at least to set a higher standard for individual and communal behavior that models these *middot*. If we succeed, even a little, when we sit here a year from now, we may notice that we've actually made some progress as human beings, that we've added at least a little more *kedushah,* a little more holiness to our lives, our community, and our world.

The people in this community vary in the degree to which we profess to believe in God. But I don't believe I've yet met someone who denies the human spirit, the essential aspect of human beings we call the soul. The soul, the *neshamah*, is the purest and deepest aspect of ourselves. Our soul represents that which is godly in us and in every human being. Our soul helps us see beyond ourselves and sense that we each are part of a greater reality. Our soul saves us from utter egocentricity and self-centeredness. Our soul can help us overcome the *yetzer hara.* And each *middah*, each act of godliness we practice, brightens and strengthens our soul.

Unlike when I was a kid, now I understand that the work of *teshuvah*, of transformation, is a process. It's never complete. To hope to change a society, we must first effect change in ourselves; to hope to shift a world towards compassion and decency, we must be more compassionate and more decent in how we treat those we love and, even more, those whom we find it difficult to like.

I like to think of the *shofar* as a kind of tuning fork of the soul. *Tekiah, teruah, shevarim* – the sounds of the shofar shatter our emotional defenses and penetrate the hardened shells of our ego; they arouse and strengthen our *neshamah*, our soul, our highest, deepest, truest, most vulnerable, best self.

My prayer is that this year, amidst this city's relentless roar, we will find moments of calm, moments in which our minds see what our soul already knows: that each of us is but one unique, precious, sacred part of an awesome, infinitely greater reality.

May the still, small voice of our soul soothe our fears and encourage us to be just a bit more patient, a bit more vulnerable, a bit more grateful.

May the whispers of our soul soften our wounded hearts, that we might hear each other more deeply and forgive our imperfections more generously.

Hayom harat haolam. As the world is reborn today, may we and all on earth wake up and together find our way back to the simple reason we were put here: to care for this precious planet; to love each other the best we can.