

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

Those of you who have spent any time at all with me over the last two months or so know that I've started taking karate lessons. I'd been watching Yonatan working away at the Mitcham Dojo since February and was very impressed both by his seriousness and by how hard he was working out. So I decided to try it. It has been quite an eye-opening experience. For someone whose most serious foray into exercise prior to this was yoga, karate has represented a considerable challenge. An old friend of mine loved to say that the advantage of starting a new exercise program is how quickly you reach your targeted heart rate. I'm constantly discouraged at just how little time it takes for me to feel exhausted, and then there's still another forty minutes left in the class.

Karate is a thoroughly counter-intuitive experience for a forty-four year old rabbi. I gaped in amazement when my sparring partner, a second-degree black belt, passed me her boxing gloves and encouraged me to hit her in the torso as hard as I could. Just about impossible to do when I've spent my whole life up until this point avoiding violence in my personal life and strongly encouraging my kids to do the same. As I'm learning to punch and kick, I'm realising just how strongly I've been programmed not to do so, even should I find myself in a dangerous situation. I have psychological barriers to overcome, as well as physical barriers.

It may seem far-fetched to compare my immersion in karate to the experience of the High Holy Days. Or not. Karate—or really any serious physical fitness program—slams us up against our physical limits. There is so much we wish to do, so much we wish we were capable of. But we're just not there, or at least not yet. I feel like I'm making good progress in my studies, but each class humbles me as I realise just how far I have to go.

These Yamim Nora'im—these Days of Awe—should affect our minds and souls in the same way working out affects our bodies. We are slammed up against our limits—but this time, we are facing our limits as human beings. Each year I take a look at myself in the mirror and am discouraged to see the same flaws, the same areas in need of repair, as in the previous year. Unlike in karate, improvement comes

painfully slowly, over the course of years rather than weeks. As I grow older, I worry that I am losing the ability to change. True transformation requires a breaking and remaking of the heart that is painful at any age. Am I still prepared to be open to this process as I grow ever more rooted in my ways? Some years, I honestly wonder if it's possible for me to change at all.

The ten days of Repentance are based on the heartfelt belief that change is indeed possible. In his magnificent treatise on repentance, the medieval philosopher and rabbi Maimonides fleshed out an intricate process of self-transformation. He writes of how crucial that moment is when one is given the opportunity to commit the same sin once again and resists the temptation. According to Maimonides, a person who has managed to leave behind the sins of earlier years should mark the significance of the occasion in a profound way. He suggests the person consider moving to a new home: not across town, but in an entirely new place. He also suggests that the person take on a new name. This represents the recognition that this person is wholly different than the one who came before. Maimonides powerfully describes a person remade through the experience of teshuvah—repentance.

I'm always astonished at the end of a brutally-difficult hour of karate that I'm prepared to return for another lesson. Why do I put myself through this, pushing myself so hard? One reason is that I'm not doing it alone. I was surprised and delighted from the start at the level of camaraderie in the class, especially from impressive martial arts experts. There's a feeling that we're all in it together, and that encourages each of us to keep trying.

The same is true for teshuvah. It is a very private process, but at the same time a very public one. When we turn to confess our sins on Yom Kippur, the formulas are always phrased in the plural. We say “for the sin *we* sinned before You” rather than “for the sin *I* sinned before You.” One reason given for this choice is that we confess to sins that we have not committed, with the understanding that there are really bad Jews out there who are guilty of all these crimes. Another reason I might suggest is that each of us is granted the ability to remain anonymous within the community: no one need know of our guilt if we all make confession together.

The High Holy Days are a time to turn to God, but they are also a time to turn to each other. Traditional Jews spent these weeks worrying that they had transgressed the religious commandments to observe Shabbat or keep the laws of kashrut. Progressive Jews tend to reflect on our actions towards one another with a critical eye and fret about how we can make amends. Hopefully, by the time we reach Yom Kippur we have found within ourselves the necessary courage to have that hard conversation, make that tough phone call, or write that difficult letter. Forgiveness has been extended, relationships have been repaired, and that shofar blast at the close of Yom Kippur brings with it a true sense of optimism for the future.

Rosh Hashanah is a time to look inward, but also outward to the community around us. These ten days give us an opportunity to affirm how important we all are for each other, and to celebrate the role our community plays in our lives. A small number of Jews trek off to distant mountains or humble retreat houses and observe the High Holy Days alone. But the vast majority of us pack into synagogues, extend hands and hugs of greeting, and revel in this time we have to be together.

There are bound to be moments in the service when we experience alienation. The prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are utterly different in tone and meaning than the familiar liturgy of Shabbat. These prayers are weighty, threatening, sometimes even terrifying. Maimonides spoke of the ten days of awe as a time when our souls hung in the balance. Each of us, he writes, is to imagine that our deeds have been placed on a scale, with the good deeds and bad deeds exactly the same weight. Which way will our scale pull? What choices will we make which will determine whether our lives are a blessing or a curse? It is a difficult thing to strip away all of the distractions and preoccupations that fill most of our days and instead take a hard look at ourselves. What a blessing that we do not do it alone. What a blessing that we have one another. May this new year find us indeed renewed: may our souls be renewed by the season, may our hearts be touched and warmed, may we turn back to God and back towards each other, and may we all be written and sealed for a year of joy, of hope, of health, of peace. Amen.