

Yom Kippur Derasha (Sermon) - Day - 5767 (2006)
"Plastic Surgery for the Soul"
Monday October 2, 2006

A 60 year old woman was walking down the street one day when a voice called out to her from heaven. "You will live to be 100 years old," the voice said. Convinced that she had heard the voice of God, the woman decided to have some work done. After all, if she had 40 more years to live, she might as well look good. So, she went for some plastic surgery - a tummy tuck here, some liposuction there . . . all the works. On her way out of the plastic surgeon's office, the woman got hit by a car and died. As she went before God she complained bitterly: "You told me I had another 40 years to live, and that same day you have me get hit by a car! How could you!"
God answered: "I'm sorry. I didn't recognize you."

Well, I suppose that God isn't quite as easily fooled as in this story. But, in a manner of speaking, we are all here today to have some plastic surgery. In effect, we want to change the way that God looks at us and the way God evaluates our lives. Fortunately, this kind of plastic surgery is far less expensive (depending on how you responded to your yizkor appeal, of course). Because today we are not trying to change our appearance on the outside. Today, we are trying a little plastic surgery for our souls. This is what we call repentance.

If you think about it, תשובה, repentance, is a very powerful concept. It tells us that we have the ability to redefine ourselves, and that in so doing, we can change how God treats us. Judaism allows for the possibility of turning our lives around - even to a 180 degree angle. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40b) teaches that if a good person turns evil, that the previous good deeds are forgotten. On the other hand, if an evil person becomes righteous, all that person's evil deeds are forgotten. This is based on the verse from Ezekiel (33:12):

... צדקת הצדיק לא תצילנו ביום פשעו ורשעת הרשע לא יכשל בה ביום שובו מרשעו וצדיק לא יוכל לחיות בה ביום חטאתו

The righteousness of the righteous will not save him on the day of his transgression, nor with the evil of the evildoer impede him on the day of his repentance from his evildoing, and the righteous will not succeed in the day of his sin.

In effect, this tells us that a good person cannot rest on his or her laurels - that they must continue to be good - and that a person who did wrongly in the past can erase that wrongdoing by finding a new path. We have the power to change the way God sees us.

What's more, God prefers repentance to punishment. Ezekiel (33:11) tells us:

אמר אליהם חי אני נאם אדני יקוק אם אחפץ במות הרשע כי אם בשוב רשע מדרך ו חנה שובו שובו מדרך כיכם הרעים ולמה תמותו בית ישראל

As I live, declares the Lord God, I do not desire the death of the wicked, but rather in the return of the wicked from his way so as to live - return, return from your evil ways, why should you die oh House of Israel?

The potential to change our identity before God is an extremely powerful idea. It teaches us that we determine who we are. This is an essential component of our free will. The idea of תשובה (repentance) tells us that despite what we may have done right or wrong in our past, we are still masters of our own destiny and in control of our own identity. This is a message I think we all too often forget.

Sometimes, I believe that our sense of free will becomes a victim of our own inertia. We go through life day after day, year after year, doing the same things. Sometimes, maybe, we consider whether we should live our lives better. But most of the time, that is just a passing thought, rather than becoming a theory that we turn into practice. We get so comfortable with life as it is, that we forget about life as it should be.

We also have a tendency to accept all too uncritically what our previous generations have done. If our parents were not observant Jews, for instance, then we may not be - not because we really think that this is what we should be, but because this is what we have always been. But just as our previous behavior does not control us, our family does not control our destiny either.

No doubt all of our families have many good qualities in their lives. We should accept and embrace these many positive attributes our families taught us, but we should not just assume that how we grew up is how we should continue to live. How can we really live, how can we really exert our own sense of free will, if we do not review our lives and try to improve on them?

In physics we say that objects in motion tend to stay in motion, and objects at rest, tend to stay at rest. In פרקי אבות (*Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers) (2:2) Ben Azai says the same thing about a person's behavior: מצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה *one mitzvah (good deed) leads to another, and one sin leads to another.*

But this principle of physics is not a hard and fast rule. After all, objects in motion only tend to stay in motion. Concerted effort can change inertia. Similarly, our life's inertia should not be allowed to dictate the course of our lives. We have the ability of תשובה (repentance) - we have the ability to exert control over the direction of our life. While one sin may lead to another, it is within our power to stop that progression. And since it is true that *one mitzvah leads to another*, we must exert our efforts to start that ball rolling.

This is why the Mishnah tells us that Ben Azai used to chase after even the simplest *mitzvot* (good deeds), and run away from all sins. He understood that there is a snowball effect. He understood that every time he performed a *mitzvah* - great or small - it represented not only that one *mitzvah*, but a fundamental change in the inertia of his life. And he understood that every time he made an error, it might well turn out to be more than just an isolated incident.

The concept of תשובה (repentance) teaches us that we control our lives. Whatever our life has been in the past, we have the ability to make it even better in the future. If we're on the right track we can, like Ben Azai, run after more *mitzvot*. If we feel we are on the wrong track, we must, like Ben Azai, begin to run away from those deeds that are guiding us down the wrong path. This is the power תשובה (repentance) and this is the power of our own free will.

We are all here to do a *mitzvah*. Whether you are here for the entire service, or whether you are here to remember your loved ones, showing love of family and **כבוד אב ואם**, *honor of father and mother*. We are all here to do a *mitzvah*. What we need to do is to exercise our ability to make sure that this is not just an isolated incident. Let us grab on to the coattails of that *mitzvah* and let it be a *mitzvah* that leads you to even more *mitzvot*. If you are here for Yizkor, then I invite you to let your next *mitzvah* be remaining with us for the rest of our service as our welcomed guests. If you are here for the first time since last year, exert your free will to break out of your old patters, and become a greater part of our community. Choose one more *mitzvah* - let it be a ritual *mitzvah* or a *mitzvah* that helps out another person. Chose the *mitzvah*, perform the *mitzvah*, and let it start to pull you in the right direction. Keep on doing that. Each *mitzvah* you do is a statement of your own free will - your ability to control your life in a positive way.

Will God recognize you next year when when Yom Kippur rolls around again? Will God recognize me next year? I hope not. Hopefully each of us will be different people by next year. A year of stagnation is a horrible waste. Our lives should never be an object at rest. If we do **תשובה** - if we live out our ability to change - if we push ourselves to achieve positive inertia this year, we will become different, better people in the eyes of God.

May we all be blessed with a year of growth and change. May we all find a new, stronger connection with God and with God's world. By next Yom Kippur, may we find ourselves with a sense of pride at all that we have accomplished, and a sense of excitement about fulfilling our duty to take even more steps in the coming year. May we continue to use our power of free will and our ability to do **תשובה** (repentance) to ever evolve into better Jews and better people. Amen.