

The Jewish holidays, which we are about to enter, are based on a particular, and I would say fairly optimistic, theory of change. Yet despite the essential optimism in Jewish tradition about our capacity to grow, the Jewish theory of teshuvah, recognizes the many pitfalls that exist along the path of repentance.

A theory of change is an explanation of how things will get from the initial state, where things are today, typically an undesirable state, to the more ideal goal state. Having a theory of change is considered very important today in organizational work and you certainly wouldn't get funding for any kind of project without one.

Our Machzor never had to go through a grant review but it does put forward its own theory about how people change.

It recognizes that change requires energy, and that this energy needs a source. The source of energy for change is typically the dissatisfaction that we feel with things as they are. But our tradition recognizes that this dissatisfaction is not automatic. The Rav, Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik, a great 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox theologian, who lived well before the era of fake news, spoke at length about our human propensity to refuse to accept the reality of unfavorable facts. Denial is a great obstacle to change.

Regret can only come about after there is recognition of wrong doing . Jewish tradition believes that regret is enhanced by confession, vidui, putting into words our understanding of what we have done wrong. Even if these words are not shared with any other person, their formulation gives a greater reality to our recognition that something is not right.

But in our tradition's understanding of how people work, being dissatisfied with things as they are and even experiencing regret, will not be enough. Dissatisfaction for which one does not take responsibility leads to grumbling and complaining which can continue for years without prompting change. Regret can lead to a sense of despair and resignation. Rabbi Adin Steinsalz, known best for his Talmud commentaries and translations, sees this as the greatest trap into which humans are likely to fall. Depressed and disheartened we can wallow in guilt and self-recrimination without making changes.

This is especially prone to happen when the things we regret are in the past and seem unchangeable, as for example, mistakes we made in raising our children, or in our behavior towards someone who is no longer alive. Yet in the movies we saw earlier this evening, we found that the past is not totally over. In the film *Moonlight*, when the adult Chiron visits his mother in drug rehab and she expresses her regrets for her failings in raising him. it

cannot undo the damage done to him, but I believe it is the trigger for his moving forward to work on his own life. Similarly in Hugo, so long as George Melies is attempting to deny the past, not even allowing his goddaughter to see movies, he and his family cannot heal.

For Rabbi Steinsalz and for other Jewish thinkers, in addition to regret, change also requires a belief that one can be different than one is currently, a belief in our personal efficacy, and a vision of what that change would look like. It is this confidence in positive change that ultimately leads to a reawakening of hope which provides the energy for action.

So where does that leave us? Maimonides' advice is to focus on what is least natural for us, even to overdo it in countering our natural inclinations. The stingy man should be overly generous, and the timid person, speaking out in the public sphere. If we feel that we are basically ok and find it hard to identify where we have missed the mark, then we need to focus on those elements of our tradition and worship that remind us of our failings. But if we tend to blame ourselves and sink into despair then it is the passages about the potential for rebirth through teshuvah that need to be our personal Torah.

If the words of the Bible are all inspired by the same God, one questioner challenged the rabbis, why does Hosea speak of doom and gloom while the closing chapters of Isaiah speak only encouragement? It is not the source of inspiration who has changed, the rabbi explained, it is the community and its needs.

Our new machzorim, our High Holy Day prayer books, Mishkan HaNefesh, volumes one and two, have combined over 1,000 pages. May we each seek out and find the words we particularly need to bring us into a good and sweet new year.