

**Chapter 7 – WHAT THE SOUL DOES WHILE THE GATES ARE STILL OPEN:
עֲשֶׂרֶת יָמֵי תְשׁוּבָה – THE TEN DAYS OF TESHUVAH**

*For ten days, the gates are open and the world is fluid. We are finally awake, if only in fits and starts, if only to toss and turn. **For ten days**, transformation is within our grasp. **For ten days**, we can imagine ourselves not as fixed and immutable beings, but rather as a limitless field upon which qualities and impulses rise up and fall away again like waves of the sea. Some of these impulses rise up with particular intensity. We may even experience them as afflictions, but they can be the keys to our transformation. Their intensity points to the disequilibrium and dysfunction in us that is in need of transformation.*

For ten days, the field of mind is like a painting by Kandinsky (Russian painter, generally credited as the pioneer of abstract art, 1866 – 1944). Energy and form float in that field, and we have the sense that we can shape our lives by choosing where to invest our focus and intention, by choosing which forms to follow and which to let go.

This is not a linear process, not something that takes a clear nor even discernable path. Rather it happens in fits and starts. Sometimes it may not even seem to be happening at all. But the gates are in fact open, and if our intention is aligned with this spiritual reality, then transformation also opens as a real possibility, even if it doesn't manifest itself right away.

Parshat Netzavim is usually read on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Ten Days of Teshuvah. R' Lew writes that this parsha addresses Teshuvah itself, the process of active transformation we experience during the ten days, more directly and to greater effect than any other portion of the Torah, specifically in Deuteronomy 30:1-10. The most apparent aspect of this ten-verse passage is that the word-root shav (to turn, to return --- the root of the word Teshvuah) is repeated seven times. This sort of ritual repetition signifies that the word is extremely significant. Here it illuminates several important facets of the process of Teshuvah.

First of all, we learn that *Teshuvah* can arise in the most hopeless circumstances. In fact, it often seems to begin that way. This passage begins in the darkest days of exile, when we are sitting “among the nations to whom the Lord your God has driven you.” **Most of us only embark on the difficult and wrenching path of transformation when we feel we have no choice but to do so**, when we feel as if our backs are to the wall, when the circumstances of our lives have pushed us to the point of a significant leave-taking, when we have suffered loss or death, divorce or unemployment. Transformation is just too hard for us to volunteer for. Interestingly, God is depicted as the one who is doing the pushing here. We are in the predicament that has brought us to the point of transformation because God has driven us there. **In other words, that predicament is part of the process. It is a gift, the agent of our turning.**

Second, this passage shows us the complexity of transformation. Transformation is not something that happens once and for all time. The people turn three different times in this passage, and as it closes, they are promised a great blessing, but only if they continue to turn in the future.

Transformation does not have a beginning, a middle, or an end. We never reach the end of *Teshuvah*. It is always going on. We are awake for a moment, and then we are asleep again. *Teshuvah* seems to proceed in a circular motion. Every step away is also a step toward home.

And it may never be clear to us that the work of transformation has borne fruit. This is usually the case in the realm of spiritual practice. **Real spiritual transformation invariably takes a long time to manifest itself in our lives.** Spectacular, immediate results --- sudden changes in aspect or in the way we see the world --- are always suspect, and usually suggest a superficial rather than a profound transformation. Profound transformation only manifests itself over time. When Yaakov has his great vision of the ladder and realizes he has been visited by God, he exclaims out loud, “My God! God has been in this place all along and I never knew it.” From this moment of epiphany, we expect he will be changed. We are disappointed when he continues to behave like the same manipulative person he has always been. But when we look at the larger area of Yaakov’s life, we see that this vision really does effect a profound change in him. It’s just that this change isn’t evident right away. It takes more than twenty years for it to take root.

So, the process of *Teshuvah* is neither clear nor linear. And who is the principal actor in all this? Is it us or is it God? In the passage from *Netzavim*, sometimes we are the subject of the turning and sometimes God is the subject, all of which seems to suggest that *Teshuvah* – the transformation – is a reciprocal process that depends on both God and us. No one else can do transformation for us, but on the other hand we can’t do it by ourselves either. The possibility of transformation always exists, but we have to consciously turn toward it in order to activate it. At the same time, our initiative can only take us so far. After that, we have to have faith. We have to depend on the universe to support the flowering of our intention.

So, the first ten verses of Deuteronomy 30 give us a very accurate picture of this process of transformation, its complexity, its interactive quality, its confusing, nonlinear course. But the next four verses give us some extraordinary direct and clear advice about precisely how to do *Teshuvah*, how to effect our own transformation.

“Because this commandment (to do *Teshuvah*) is not too wonderful for you and it’s not distant from you either. It is not in heaven, so you can’t say, ‘Who can go up to heaven and bring it to us and cause us to hear it so that we can do it?’ And it is not beyond the sea, so you can’t say, ‘Who can go across the sea and bring it to us and cause us to hear it so that we can do it?’ But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, so you can do it (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

***Teshuvah* begins with a turn, a turn away from the external world and toward the inner realm of the heart.** If we are not used to solitude or contemplation, if we are normally consumed by a frantic round of activity, if we live our lives at a rapid pace, **then**

simply stopping --- simply coming to synagogue every day and praying, setting aside a small period of time each day for contemplation, observing the *Shabbat* or some other conscious retreat from the world of activity and stress – **can suddenly leave us in confrontation with the contents of our heart.** These contents are an open secret. We already know this secret. Often all that's required of us is to be still for a moment, and the heart begins to disclose itself to us of its own accord.

But the heart is a mysterious and complex thing. Why does the heart require such an indirect approach? Why won't it just open wide when we ask it to? Why does it resist us so? We are sentimental about the heart, but the truth is, most of us spend a great deal of time and energy avoiding the heart at all costs. Really, we are afraid of what we might find there. We don't even know where it is or how we might find it, but somehow we understand there is a lot of pain there. If we are human, we suffer. The heart holds our suffering. The pain we most need to deal with is sitting right there on our hearts in plain sight, or else it is just inside its dark chambers.

In either case we are not inclined to look at it. We live in a culture that conditions us to avoid suffering, and the consequence of this is that we live at some distance from our heart. We are not in the habit of looking at it, but of distancing ourselves from its content. As we begin the process of *Teshuvah*, we need to make a conscious effort to overcome the momentum of this denial and avoidance. This is an effort well worth making. **That pain, that afflictive energy that rests on the surface of our hearts and just below it as well, will be the catalyst for our transformation. The nature of our pain points us to the nature of the transformation we need to make.**

If we are angry, we need to move toward inhabiting our anger and then letting go of it. If we are in despair, we need to move toward hope. But the intensity of our pain is even more helpful in this process than its particular cast. As we sit in the boundless field of mind during the ten days of transformation, impulses and feelings rise up and fall away all around us. Those impulses and feelings that assert themselves with particular force are the ones we are most likely to follow. **This is the great gift of suffering.** Intense afflictive states --- anger, boredom, fear, guilt, impatience, grief, disappointment, dejection, anxiety, despair --- are the great markers of our *Teshuvah*. **By their very intensity, they call us to transformation.**

These feelings are so familiar to us we usually believe them to be part of our intrinsic being. **They are not, and in this sacred time of transformation, while the gates of heaven are open and we are finally awake, we can see that they are not.** We can see that they are just impulses, arising for a moment, the way wind and rain and snow arise for a moment in the world. They are wind and rain and snow, but they are not the world. **They are not us. They only become us by our own choice, by our choosing to see them that way, by our choosing to cling to them so tenaciously.** We can make another choice if we wish to. We can choose to allow these feelings to rise up and then let them fall away again like a hot breeze.

And this is the simplest and most frightening truth about all this business. Anger is a choice. Boredom is a choice. Fear is a choice. No one can force us in this regard. No one can make us feel this feeling. No one can crawl inside us and alter us. **We are responsible for the state of our own consciousness.**

The great drama of this season is the drama of choice. The power of choice is immense. We can choose to let go of anger, boredom, fear, guilt, impatience, grief, disappointment, dejection, anxiety and despair, **and we can make this choice moment by moment**, and we can make this choice in a broader way as well. We can let go of each constituent feeling as we become aware of it, and we can form a clear and continuous intention to let these feelings go.

For example, when anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, and I forgive them, we are planting the seeds of forgiveness and love. We are awakening the powerful force of intention in our minds, and even if it doesn't bear fruit right away --- even if we don't feel a great rush of love at first --- we can trust the laws of nature and the power of intention to support the flowering of forgiveness in our souls and in the world. We form our intention and then we let heaven and earth bear witness. Opening to forgiveness, we begin to see it all around us.

Choose life so that you may live. This is the great conclusion of *Parshat Netzavim*. Live this life! This is also the great imperative of the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, those days when we stand poised between life and death. We can choose life so that we may live. Choose this life --- for there is no other.

GUIDED QUESTIONS TO REFLECT UPON

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1 – What predicament that you have faced in your life have you come to view as a gift, as an agent in your own personal transformation?

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2 – Can you see in your own life where real spiritual transformation took a long time to manifest itself in your life? What was it?

3 – Please summarize how you understand the 4 verses in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 providing some extraordinary direct and clear advice about precisely how to do *Teshuvah*.

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4 – What pain or suffering that you have endured have you come to experience as the catalyst for your transformation? Can you see the connection between the nature of your pain and how it has pointed you to the nature of the transformation you have needed to make?

5 – Please explain how you understand that your feelings are not part of your intrinsic being and that they only seem to be you by your own choice.

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6 – How do you feel about yourself playing the central role of “The great drama of this season is the drama of choice. The power of choice is immense.”