

Do Teshuva Today! Or Maybe, Don't?
Longing, re-turning, and what procrastination makes possible
Rabbi Leah Carnow
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Sixteen years ago, at the end of summer, I arrived to study abroad in Alicante, Spain. Within the first day of my arrival, I met Carmela, the woman who would be my host mother for the next four months.

One of my first memories of Carmela, I couldn't understand something that she was saying in Spanish. Mojado, mojado, she repeated at me as she finally brought me over to a sink and stuck her head under the running water to demonstrate. I realized I knew the word but wasn't used to her accent yet. She laughed, shaking her sopping hair at me. Mojado. Wet.

It wasn't long before I was smitten with this curious, warm, and exuberant 64 year old woman.

I fell in love with Carmela, in quiet moments sitting together on her couch, watching romantic movies like Titanic and The Holiday dubbed into Spanish. I fell in love with her dancing sevillanas in a folk dancing class that she signed us both up for after she learned I loved to dance. I fell in love with her over very bossy cooking lessons of how to make perfect rice, always toasted first in olive oil. I fell in love with her in a hospital where she and I went together to meet her newborn grandson for the first time.

I fell in love with Carmela and I also fell in love with Spain. I fell in love with the hodgepodge that was the Alicante Jewish community. I fell in love with the soft sand. With the gentle waves of the Mediterranean. The warm people. The palm trees and the bougainvillea. The beautiful Moorish fortress built on the hill overlooking the city. The tapas. The feel of Spanish on my tongue. The Camino de Santiago that brought me face to face with my own strength to hike 62 miles in 5 days, with a fascinating cross-section of the world, and with a lot of cows.

So when I left Spain as a 20 year old, I left tiny pieces of my heart there, one piece buried in the sand, and one piece with Carmela.

And then, for nearly 16 years, I didn't return to Alicante.

In the many moments where I planned other trips in Europe, I told myself that I never had enough time off or enough money to get to Alicante. But these excuses were just a veil for what was actually keeping me from going to Spain. That veil was shame.

I was ashamed that I had lost touch with people. And I was really ashamed by the feeling that my Spanish had melted away, eventually being replaced by the conversational Hebrew I learned over three years of living in Jerusalem. The longer I stayed away, the harder it was to return. I was stuck in the shame, resigned to it, but still stuck.

But then something happened. Or rather a series of things happened. I had a baby—hi Noor!—and with a child, my whole life changed, of course. I wasn't just changed by my new role as a parent, however, I was also shaken by a physically and emotionally challenging postpartum period, which limited my ability to move through the world the way I was used to.

All of us have moments that shake us up in our lives. These turning points are sometimes positive but often they involve loss—an illness or disability, the death of a friend or family member, a breakup of a relationship or the ending of a significant identity, a tragic event that shakes not just ourselves but entire communities or even nations.

I can't help but reflect on September 11th today, on this 25th anniversary.

I remember being shaken, not just by the shock of the attacks themselves and the tremendous loss of life that happened that horrible day, but also the wars that followed, the islamaphobia and hatred, the increasing polarization and extremism in our country that emerged after September 11th. And I was shaken by the loss of the

illusion of security I had had until that point. I imagine 9/11 shook each of us, each in our own way.

And as we mark this 25th anniversary, I also think about my mother, a born and bred New Yorker, who somewhere in the midst of processing her own grief and terror over the horrific attacks decided that because life was short and unpredictable, she would finally get me the thing I wanted most in the world at that time—a dog. Which is how our dog Rosie came into my life shortly thereafter.

We do not need acts of terror to shake us up and remind us that life is short and unpredictable. One of our central liturgical poems of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Unetaneh Tokef, also reminds us in the middle of our prayers: All of us will die. Some of us will die in gentle ways. Some of us will die in terrifying or painful ways. Some of us will die this year. And some of us will live another full year cycle.

Facing this truth is scary. We must live in the uncertainty of not knowing how our own lives will unfold. But our liturgy tells us what to do—*teshuva u'tefila u'tzedakah* ma'avirim et ro'ah hagezeira. *Teshuva*, prayer, and working toward a more equitable world are spiritual tools that can transform the harshness of life.

I want to talk about *teshuva*, this word we sometimes translate as repentance, sometimes as returning.

In his book, aptly titled, *Teshuva*, the teacher and translator Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes, “Broadly defined, *teshuva* is more than just repentance from sin; it is a spiritual reawakening, a desire to strengthen the connection between oneself and the sacred...put concretely, *teshuvah* is simply a turning, be it a complete, abrupt change of direction or a series of smaller turns, not all of equal significance.

Teshuva, as Rabbi Steinsaltz defines it, is the turning point (or points) that move us closer to connecting with ourselves and with the sacred.

Repairing relationships with others then is an obvious part of a *teshuva*. So is repairing our relationships with ourselves and with God.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Eliezer teaches three pieces of advice about how to live.

Rabbi Eliezer says: Let the honor of your friend be as dear to you as your own; Do not be easily provoked to anger;

וְשׁוּב יוֹם אֶחָד לְפָנַי מִיָּתְדִי

And do *teshuva* one day before your death.

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Eliezer's students ask, "What does that mean, *shuv*, return, the day before your death? Does a person know the day on which he will die?"

All the more so, says their teacher Rabbi Eliezer, one should do *teshuva* today in case one may die tomorrow. In doing so, one will spend their entire life in a state of *teshuva*.

This is like the old advice given to married couples—don't go to sleep angry. We should not put off doing *teshuva* because today could be our last chance.

But I want to push back on Rabbi Eliezer's teaching. Doing *teshuva* each and every day sounds like a wonderful aspiration, but this advice also feels impractical. If we actually followed it, would we even need this season of holidays at all?

Simply put, most of us put off the work of *teshuva*. Why? We human beings procrastinate.

And we don't just procrastinate doing *teshuva*. We procrastinate everything! We avoid "doing the thing" we have to do because it is unpleasant or hard to do. Or we procrastinate because we don't know where to begin or we aren't sure of the steps. Or we procrastinate when we feel shame; and then often, the shame further spirals us into even more procrastination.

But I want to offer us the idea that procrastination isn't inherently bad. It's an important part of life.

And luckily the shame and uncertainty within procrastination sometimes transforms into longing, which then can turn into motivation and action. That process takes time.

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In the book *I Didn't Do the Thing Today*, writer Madeleine Dore connects procrastination with the stages of creative process. Quoting psychologist Graham Wallas' work, *The Art of Thought*, Dore teaches, "There's the preparation stage, where we gather inspiration and research, the incubation stage, where we step away and allow connections to simmer, the illumination stage, where a solution often spontaneously arrives in an "aha" moment, and the verification stage, where we take necessary action and do the thing."

This is a non-linear process of gathering, stepping away, arriving at a plan and doing. By recognizing all of these stages as part of the process, says Dore, "this allows us to cultivate curiosity as we gather, to be comfortable with uncertainty as we step away, to be patient as we await a solution, and to show up when there is something that must be done." *Teshuva* sometimes requires the same extensive process; it can't always be done in one day.

And procrastination means we can sometimes come to a more creative solution that in the end is more powerful, more meaningful, more transformative than if we hadn't delayed.

I wish I hadn't been so stuck in my shame that I didn't return to Spain when I longed to do so. But after fifteen years of waiting, my shame and longing finally morphed into motivation. I yearned to reconnect with the version of myself who had lived in Alicante and to deepen my connection with Yoni. After a physically and emotionally difficult period in my life, it felt possible to make the trip to Spain. So with the support of Yoni's amazing family who stepped up to watch our child, to Spain we went.

When we arrived, the city of Alicante immediately pulled us in with the sounds of live flamenco.

Yoni and I ate tapas, we swam, and we walked along the harbor late at night.

We shopped at the central market, we explored the castle at sunset and watched as the sky turned from blue to orange to purple.

It would have been magical if that had been it. *Dayeinu!*

And then we went to 48 Padre Mariana. I didn't have a phone number or an email address for Carmela, but all these years I had remembered her address, though not the

exact apartment number. With Yoni's encouragement, I picked a buzzer to ring at the apartment building. Brrrrring. The voice on the phone didn't know Carmela.

I tried the next buzzer and something within me clicked, yes, this was the right number. So when a woman picked up and I asked in Spanish, do you know Carmela? And she said, yes and I said, Are YOU Carmela, and she said yes, I thought my heart would explode. And when I started to say, I'm Leah, I was a student who lived here with you, I couldn't even finish the sentence before she buzzed us in.

All these years I spent longing, thinking of Carmela, doubting she would remember me if we ever saw each other again. And then suddenly she was there and she was grabbing me and hugging me and calling her daughter to say, you won't believe who is here to see me, and what I wanted to say was that, yes, of course you can't believe, who would believe that I flew across the world for a chance to maybe see you and then you were there, home, sitting at the same table, just where I had left you!

Maybe I didn't go back to Spain all these years because I didn't need to yet, I needed to go at a moment when my faith was shaky after a difficult period in my life and in the world. I needed the reminder of why I loved Carmela. And I needed to know that Carmela had loved me too.

Sometimes we long for the divine, she feels absent. We're left wondering where she went. And then sometimes She appears again before you, at the same table where you left her, there to remind you that you are loved and who you truly are. Every year as we close our reading of Eicha, Lamentations, on Tisha B'av, we chant the words:

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּבָה תִּהְיֶה יָמֵינוּ כִּקְדֶּם

Bring us back, Adonai and we will come back. Renew our days as it was before!

We sing these curious and hopeful words every week at Shabbat services as we return the Torah to the ark and they appear in our High Holiday liturgy as well.

These words came alive to me in Alicante. Bring me back to Spain and I will come back, God! Bring me back to my old self, my old home, old but new, changed, renewed!

Alicante was very much not the same as I remembered, but much about it was the same. And of course, I was both the same and not the same as my 20 year old self. But God brought me there so that I could meet an old version of myself there and remember that I was still her.

I did not return to Spain or to Carmela when I first wanted to. I had to experience the longing, the shame, and the sadness until I finally heard the voice that said, *shuv*. Return. GO. Do the thing you've been putting off.

I understand that I needed to wait all those years. I couldn't return until I needed to restore my belief in possibility. I needed to return to myself and to God at the right time. That kind of *teshuvah* did not, could not, have happened in one day.

Can we hold the paradox of the demand to do *teshuvah* now and also let ourselves simmer in longing, maybe even putting off what we think is the "real" *teshuvah* in the process?

Yes, do *teshuvah* as if tomorrow is your last day! Turn toward those whom you have harmed or have harmed you. Turn toward yourself. Turn back to God. Don't delay because you do not want to leave the world stuck in messy relationships that you have been longing to untangle. Do *teshuvah*, do what you yearn to do soon—now—because you do not know how much time you will have. Return and repair as if today is your last chance.

AND

Teshuvah also means turning toward ourselves with compassion and forgiveness, sometimes allowing ourselves to stay longer in the land of shame and longing until we arrive at a turning point.

Many of us can think of a relationship that we wish we could repair. We may feel anger, shame, guilt, longing, or grief.

And though of course I want to tell you go, do *teshuva*, do it now, what I also want to offer is some acceptance that maybe this isn't the right time for repairing a specific relationship that you have waited to repair or be repaired. Some relationships even should not be repaired. That doesn't mean that *teshuva* doesn't apply to you.

We all have to forgive ourselves for being too busy, too tired, too poor, too stingy, too afraid, too ashamed, too in pain, or too angry to “do the thing,” including the *teshuva* thing. But if *teshuva* is as Rabbi Steinsaltz teaches, the act of bringing you closer to yourself and the sacred, then guess what, forgiveness of ourselves—this too is *teshuva*.

The High Holiday liturgy calls us to action but it also calls us to connect with the experience of longing. *Shaarei shamayim petach*, we long for the gates of heaven to open. *V'Otzarcha hatov lanu tiftach*. We yearn for a year of goodness.

What would it be like to forgive yourself already for not yet doing *teshuva* in some particular relationship? What would it be like to forgive yourself for putting off what you've been ashamed of or longing to do?

And what would happen if you found the desire within the longing and just stayed with that feeling?

This new year invites us to go. Go to the limits of longing. Feel it. And then—Ring the buzzer. The gates are ready to be opened.

Shana tova.