

AWAKENED BY LOVE

HOW CAN WE POSITIVELY TRANSFORM THE WORLD AND OURSELVES?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Rosenthal focuses on the Days of Awe as a time infused with the potential for personal change and growth. She opens with the words of Rabbi Alan Lew:

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 on 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.

Rabbi Alan Lew, *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared*

During this time of year, the ideas of change and transformation are perhaps most strongly associated with the concept of *teshuvah*, return or repentance. In her sermon, Rabbi Rosenthal refers to the medieval scholar Rambam (also known as “Maimonides”), who offers the following reflection on the idea of *teshuvah*:

Even though the blowing of the shofar is a decree of the Torah, the reason for the commandment is an allusion: awaken, awaken, you who are deep in your sleep. Rise from your unconsciousness and examine your actions. Return in teshuvah and remember your Creator. You who forget the truth amidst wasted time, spending all your years in meaningless and empty pursuits that neither help nor rescue. Look into yourselves and improve your ways and deeds. Abandon, all of you, your wrong path and harmful plan.

Therefore every year a person should regard himself as being half praiseworthy and half blameworthy, and so too the world as half praiseworthy and half blameworthy. If he were to commit one sin, he would tip himself and the entire world to the side of guilt, and cause its destruction. If he were to commit one positive deed, he would tip the

entire world to the side of merit, and bring about its salvation and rescue. This is the meaning of the verse (Proverbs 10:25): a righteous person is the foundation of the Universe, which refers to the one who rights himself and tips the balance of the entire world, thus rescuing it.

Rambam, *The Ways of Repentance* 3:4

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do you understand these two texts?
- (b) In what ways are these two texts similar? In what ways are they different?
- (c) Rambam prescribes a particular philosophy he feels people should embrace with regards to their actions. What is it? Do you agree with him? Why, or why not?
- (d) How might we enact this philosophy?
- (e) Rambam goes on to recommend a particular series of tasks he feels should be done at this time of year. What are some of the ways you “jolt” yourself?

Rambam suggests that positive behavior can have the same kind of effect as negative behavior. Rabbi Rosenthal imagines how this might work:

Most of the time, when we think about sudden events jolting us from our complacency and helping push us towards that transformation, we think of tragic events – death, natural disasters, sudden illness. All of these often cause us to reexamine our lives and recommit ourselves to living by our most deeply held values.

But what if we didn't wait until something terrible happened, or until Yom Kippur came around to remind us of the consequences of stagnation. What if we could build a world where people's lives were changed, where people experienced acts of disequilibrium, where we are knocked over by the waves not of affliction, as Lew says, but by radical acts of *Hesed*, of loving-kindness, of goodness and love. What if every good act that we did, or was done to us, built, bit by bit a tower of kindness that changed the world. In a world where we feel run down, almost numb, to constant bad news and tragedy, could one kindness, one tiny ripple, change who we are?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think of this idea? Can positive acts jolt us out of complacency? What kinds of positive acts?
- (b) What, if any, positive acts have woken you up, or spurred you to change?

Rabbi Rosenthal offers the following examples of how positive, loving actions can spur transformation:

It is the Jewish bride and groom in Houston who, upon realizing that their wedding was not going to happen during the hurricane, took all the food that had been purchased and prepared and fed it to first responders. Or the mattress store owner who opened his store as a shelter to families in need.

Or the beachgoers who formed a human chain, holding on one to another to save a family swept away by a riptide. It is the Navy veteran who came to sit with the leadership of the Reform congregation in Charlottesville to help them protect their space and their spirits during the worst of the violence.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Each of these examples combines a traumatic, negative event with a positive reaction, which might in turn act as a spur for transformative change. Is the traumatic event a necessary precursor to these extraordinary acts of loving-kindness?
- (b) Do you think we are more likely to act out of love in dire circumstances? Or are acts of loving-kindness just more likely to grab our attention in such circumstances?
- (c) Have you ever experienced a traumatic event that brought out the best in you or someone else?

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

Psalm 89:3 inspired the song “*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*” by Rabbi Menachem Creditor. Written shortly after 9/11, the song charges the singers and listeners to take positive action as Rabbi Rosenthal proposes:

I will build this world from love

And you must build this world from love

And if we build this world from love

Then God will build this world from love

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do the lyrics of this song enhance your understanding of Rabbi Rosenthal's idea?
- (b) Are there things you already do that you think build the world from love?
- (c) Imagine that you were going to commit to consistently doing something that would help do this. What might that thing be and what change would you hope to bring about by doing it? How do you imagine it would make you feel?