

# Establishing Pathways of T'shuvah

Rosh Hashanah sermon 5779

One of the reasons I love being on this Jewish Spiritual path, is that built in to the tradition, is an understanding that I will lose my way. I will get distracted. I will forget. AND there is always the possibility of *T'shuvah*, of return. To Wholeness, to Center, to God-consciousness, to the wider perspective.

The pathway of cultivating Spiritual Maturity starts with knowing ourselves well enough to see that we each carry particular patterns of how we get lost, distracted, forgetful or constricted. Knowing our own patterns allows us to establish pathways of *T'shuvah*... so that we can come back to our shining essential sanity before we do too much damage.

Rosh Hashanah is a great time to take stock of our patterns and make a commitment to practices that help us to self-soothe and manage stress.

We all need a plan and some support for learning to work with the inevitable storms of fear, sadness, despair, shame or anger.

After leading High Holy Days for almost 30 years I realized that we are asking forgiveness for the very same sins every year. What was wrong here? When I met my husband, Rachmiel made a promise to me. He said, "I will do my best to only make new mistakes!" The promise of only new mistakes means that we have stepped onto a path of transformation. We don't have to be held hostage by our old habits and negativities.

Neuroscience offers some perspective. The amygdala, deep in the brain, is constantly scanning for danger; when it senses a threat, the fight-or-flight response is set off. When that happens, 80% of the blood leaves the forebrain and goes to the reptile brain, and we are literally cut off from our wisdom. All of the higher functions of the middle prefrontal cortex are shut down when we're triggered. The neural pathways of terror, anxiety, overwhelm go on overdrive, and we get stuck in repeated patterns of defense and insensitivity.

During these Days of Awe, Jews speak in the traditional language of sin, repentance and atonement. It often feels very abstract, and when I keep making the same mistakes over and over again, I wonder how useful it is.

Moses Maimonides, back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, also had some questions about our method of *T'shuvah*, and he set forth a 4-part process to make it real. Stop. Regret. Verbalize. And Make a Plan. (How could it be different next time you're in that very same situation?)

Let's just say for example you get irritable with your partner.

- First, you become aware of your negativity and you stop, before that negativity escalates into a full-blown argument.
- Second, you feel regret, remembering your love. You see the harm that you're causing with your criticism, complaint or irritability.
- Third, you ask forgiveness and begin repairing the relationship.
- The fourth step is the most interesting to me, and that's what I'd like to explore with you. How can I expect to respond differently next time I'm in the exact situation that caused this reaction in me?

My experience tells me that when I am stressed, and when I am triggered, I make mistakes; I hurt myself, and others. When I am stressed, when I am triggered or startled, my sympathetic nervous system sends me into fight, flight or freeze mode, and I lose access to my capacity for reasoned and empathic response.

We also know that the brain that we have inherited from our stone-age ancestors has a negativity bias. We are wired to look for what's wrong, to notice the threat and live on the defensive. That defensive mode, ready for trouble, hypervigilant, is not conducive to nuanced thinking or considered response.

Our stone age brain gets stuck on high alert, and reinforces habitual patterns of reactivity. Yes, we have sinned and we will continue to do so, unless we do the work of re-wiring the brain.

No matter how many "*Al Chayts*" I say this Yom Kippur... when I am hijacked by my sympathetic nervous system, I can't access my generosity, forgiveness, love or wide perspective.

And yes, it is possible to notice our negative patterns of reactivity and then re-wire the brain so that we have access to those higher functions, no matter what Life throws at us. On these Day of Awe, we thank God for the miracle of neuroplasticity. The ability of the mind to change the structure of the brain is called **Neuroplasticity**.

Together, we can make a make a plan for *T'shuvah* so that we only need to be concerned about new mistakes. And we can learn from each of those new mistakes.

And this is how I understand the purpose of our spiritual practice. We enter into positive expansive experiences of blessing, praise, open-hearted generosity, compassion, wide perspective, silence, inquiry and beauty. And we bring the extra dimensions of awareness and intention to those experiences.

There's an old saying in neuroscience: neurons that fire together wire together. This means the more you run a neuro-circuit in your brain, the stronger that circuit becomes. Even if you come from a long line of worriers, catastrophizers, and traumatized complainers who are in the habit of seeing what's wrong in every situation... you can still re-wire your brain for positivity through prayer and spiritual practice.

You do this rewiring by having positive experiences that have four qualities:

1. They must be Intense enough
2. Novel enough
3. Repeated enough
4. And you must bring your focused attention and awareness to them...

Positive experiences that fulfill these four requirements can actually create and strengthen new neural pathways that make it easier to receive the everyday blessings of aliveness, connection and pleasure.

The intensity, novelty, repetition and awareness actually increase your levels of norepinephrine and dopamine, which facilitate the formation of new synapses in the hippocampus and thus the creation of new neural structures. And from that place of aliveness, connection and pleasure, we can more easily and gracefully rise to the challenges that life gives us.

Rewiring the brain means not only creating new neural pathways for blessing, but breaking down some of the old ones.

It's called "synaptic pruning." Here's how it works. Through practice, we grow synaptic connections between neurons. These are the connections that neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and others travel across. Some

synaptic connections get pruned by microglial cells when we sleep. The connections that are less used get marked by a certain protein, and when the microglial cell detects that mark, it bonds to the protein and prunes the synapse. This is how the brain makes new space for us to learn more and release what is not essential.

By consistently bringing our attention to what's right and good, to what's amazing and wondrous, we strengthen those neural pathways, and then can receive the blessings that God is giving through this world. That's what we're doing when we enter into Praise, when we stop and stand in wonder at the miracles of our lives.

And in fact, you actually have some control over what your brain decides to delete while you sleep. It's the synaptic connections you don't use that get marked for pruning. The ones you do use are the ones that get Strengthened. Our meditation and prayer practice help us to be mindful of what occupies our brain- what we will grow and what will be released.

So, if we are to take Maimonides's advice and make a plan for how we will respond to stressful situations in the future, that plan must include the re-wiring of our brains through concerted and concentrated practice.

We can notice that our practice is working when we find ourselves in a familiar, difficult situation and then say, "My past-self would have been really upset by this... but now I can deal with it without being so triggered."

Through practice, we are able to transform passing mental states into lasting neural traits. Today, we commit to taking our prayerful moments of joy, moments of connection, moments of courage, hope and inspiration as forces that open our hearts and re-wire our brains. Our prayer is not just talk. We can change who we are, how we respond to adversity, how we open to blessing. Only by transforming ourselves can we transform our world.