

The Transformational Power of Teshuvah

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“These are the times that try men’s souls.” Although Thomas Paine wrote those words in the winter of 1776 about a different “crisis,” those very words and sentiments ring true in our day. Paine wrote to his generation in hopes of inspiring and motivating the colonists. Paine

addressed the colonists’ complacency, inertia, and indifference when it came to the basic foundation of their lives — liberty.

Paine was aware of how complacent people can become once basic needs are met and seemed to fear how the daily efforts and energies expended to provide for self and family might sideline and distract the most zealous of Yankee doodles. For Paine, it would appear, the inclination of the majority of colonists was to remain enslaved to the British Crown and renounce their mission to establish a government built on the universal rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The complacency, inertia, and indifference of the colonists were a greater threat to the nascent nation than the Tories and the Red Coats combined!

This is not the first time in history that humans wavered in their mission to challenge tyranny and servitude. The pages of history and verses in the Tanakh (Jewish Scripture) are filled with similar examples. I bring to your attention the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors. Beginning with Joseph, these Hebrews became part of the ruling class of ancient Egypt only to later have the tables turned on them. When a “new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” the once ruling class found themselves enslaved to that new king and their very lives under the complete control of Pharaoh.

When Moses comes with the message to “let my people go,” how did our ancestors respond? Did they remember the mission of Abraham and Sarah and the covenant to become a light to the nations, a blessing to humanity? Did they respond with shouts of “give me liberty or give me death?” On the contrary! Our ancestors, hearing the words of Moses responded, “leave us be! It is best for us to serve Pharaoh.” Complacency, inertia, and indifference wormed their way into the hearts of the Hebrews and our story almost ended before it began. And the challenges didn’t end with our people’s liberation from Pharaoh.

The journey of the Israelites would be fraught with challenges and painful growth. At every obstacle, lack of water, lack of food, attacks from within and without, the Israelites turned on Moses, Aaron, God, and betrayed our mission. They said to Moses, “was it for a want of graves in Egypt that you brought us into the wilderness to die?” The best response of our ancestors at that time was to return to Egypt, to embrace the familiar certainty of the past – even if that meant the end of our future.

Why is it that, when faced with difficulties and obstacles, people often sacrifice a better and brighter future on the altars of expediency and nostalgia?

I enjoy cooking. Having spent a number of years working in restaurants before deciding to become a Rabbi, I considered the possibility of studying to become a chef. I enjoy the creative challenge of combining different ingredients and cooking techniques to create a pleasing and satisfying meal.

I recently began watching past episodes of Restaurant: Impossible, a Food Channel show. In these episodes, Chef Robert Irvine consults with failing restaurants to turn them into successful establishments. Chef Irvine gives himself, his crew, the owners, and the employees, 48 hours to transform the restaurant. There’s a designer and contractor to remodel the physical space. Chef Irvine takes on the task of upgrading the menu and in your face crisis counseling for the owners and employees.

After bingeing a number of these episodes, I’ve realized a common theme, a pattern as to why these once successful restaurants became failures. More than a transformation of the physical space and the menu, Chef Irvine engages the restaurant’s owner in personal transformation.

The dirty and outdated condition of the restaurant’s interior, the sometimes incomprehensible contents of the menu, and, most importantly, the lack of taste and inferior quality of the food, are all symptoms of the individual crisis of the owner. In many of the episodes, one can readily witness the complacency, inertia, and indifference of the owner manifested in denial and defensiveness. In one episode, the owner/chef exclaims: “I’m not going to stand here and listen to Chef Irvine tell me I’ve been doing it wrong all these years!” With sledgehammer in hand, Chef Irvine not only dismantles the restaurant’s interior space, he also breaks through the owner’s defensiveness, complacency, and denial. The show is more about the personal and transformational growth of the owner than the make-over of the physical space.

Complacency, inertia and indifference the tripartite obstacles to personal and national growth and development. The ancient Israelites, once part of the ruling class of Egypt, later enslaved for generations to Pharaoh, forgot their mission. The founding of our nation, likewise, stumbled on its trajectory as those obstacles took root in the hearts and minds of many of

the colonists. Once successful restaurants found themselves failing as owners, chefs, and employees embraced complacency, inertia, and indifference. In our personal lives as well, many of us stand on the precipice of the slippery slopes of complacency, inertia, and indifference.

These coming Days of Awe/High Holy Days are days during which we are to challenge ourselves, to break out of our complacency, inertia, and indifference. In explaining why hearing the sounds of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is so important, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides, wrote: “Wake up you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber. Search your deeds and make teshuvah.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4).



The hearing of the Shofar is for one purpose only — to wake us up! The Shofar is a spiritual alarm clock set by Jewish tradition to shake us out of our complacency, stir us to action, and challenge us to become more than what we were.

Thomas Paine wrote: “The circumstances of the world are continually changing, and the opinions of men change also... [life] is for the living, and not for the dead, it is the living only that has any right in it. That which may be thought right and found convenient in one age, may be thought wrong and found inconvenient in another. In such cases, who is to decide, the living, or the dead?”

If we allow complacency, inertia, and indifference to rule our hearts, to detour us from being true to the best within us, then we are ruled by the dead. Our Torah screams to us, becharta b’chayim, choose life!

Once, we used to think a certain way. Now, we understand that we’ve grown, we’ve changed, became wiser through the experiences of our past. During these Days of Awe/High Holy Days, let us unlock the gates of self-forgiveness. Let us cast off the weight of the dead we carry inside and step into the light of our tomorrow. Let us choose life. 





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