

Last February, Tami and I purchased a new dishwasher. After twenty years, the one that was installed when our home was built finally gave out. When the new one was installed and we ran it the first time, it scared us. It was *so quiet*. I joked that our old one came with airplane mode, a function that made it as loud as a jumbo jet. As we enjoyed the newfound peace that this simple appliance could offer us, and our ability to run it whenever suited us without worrying about hearing the TV, the children, or being able to sleep, we didn't realize how lucky we were. Within a few weeks, stories began to pop up on the news that with the breakdown in the global supply chain that the early 2020 shutdown had caused, it was getting harder and harder to buy appliances like dishwashers, washer/dryers, or refrigerators. The great home improvement craze of COVID-19 had begun.

Spending day after day in our homes last year, we began looking around at the same walls, looking for ways to add new opportunities for activity, excitement, or to make our day-to-day lives better. Companies like Peloton took off in 2020, with more business than they could handle. You couldn't buy a washer/dryer or a refrigerator last fall without waiting months for delivery. The housing market as a whole took off, as people who had the opportunity realized that they wanted more from of their at-home lives, and with the newfound flexibility that working from home offered, they took advantage. Spending time with our significant others also led to a distinct rise to that most basic, almost evolutionary instinct, something that many of you, and you know who you are, indulged in: you got a pandemic puppy. My hopes for you are that that new bundle of joy has not yet worn out its welcome! Thankfully for the Weisman household we were able to keep our kids' desires at bay...for now.

Teshuvah with a Growth Mindset
Sermon for the Second Day of Rosh HaShanah 5782
Rabbi Greg Weisman - Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

It is natural to look around at our lives, look around at our situation and wonder, “how could I make this better?” For all of those external forces in our lives- our homes, our work, where we spend our free time- making the choice to upgrade or improve can come fairly easily. We might redo a kitchen or a bathroom, seek out a new job, or try a new activity to inject some new spice or flavor into our lives. With enough room on the credit card or the home equity loan we can accomplish almost anything. The one thing we can’t do with that, though, is what we come to synagogue on Rosh HaShanah to do, which is improve ourselves. For those of us like me who tend to struggle to find or maintain our patience, there isn’t a space at Target that has USB patience packs, right next to the cell phone battery packs. We can’t go to Lowe’s and buy a new honesty extractor, or to Best Buy to get a new empathy energizer. The work of *teshuvah*, the work of identifying our areas of potential growth and challenging ourselves to become the people we mean to be is work that we have to do on, for, and by ourselves. There are no shortcuts, no way to speed with up with new components or contraptions.

That work starts with admitting to ourselves that we have what to do. At this High Holy Day season, our words of prayer relay that message:

Hinini, Heani, Mima’as.

“Here I am, so poor in deeds,” we said as Rosh HaShanah entered.

Avinu Malkeinu, Choneinu va’aneinu, ki ain banu ma’asim.

“*Avinu Malkeinu*, answer us with grace, for our deeds are wanting,” is a mantra for the season.

Anachu azeh fanim u’kshei oreflomar l’fanecha, “tzadikim anachnu v’lo chatannu” Aval anachnu chatanu.

“We are arrogant and stubborn, claiming to be blameless and free of sin. But, we have stumbled and strayed. We have done wrong,” the confession we will make in eight days on Yom Kippur.

Throughout the High Holy Days, we offer these words of humility. We admit to the Holy One, and to ourselves, that we have much work to do in order to become the people we want to be.

Social psychologist Dolly Chugh has spent her career studying that very undertaking, and by her own admission, it’s hard. The personal bio in her book ends with “In her real life, she is trying just as hard as everyone else to be the person she means to be.”¹ Her work has highlighted incredible important realities about the way our minds work, especially when it comes to personal growth. She started with the groundbreaking work of Stanford Professor Carol Dweck, who distinguished between fixed and growth mindsets. In a fixed mindset, I see all of my abilities, all of my talents, my intelligences (or lack thereof) as inherent to who I am, essentially immutable and unchangeable. My potential is defined by those fixed traits, and any inabilities or shortcomings I might have are simply part of who I am. However, in a growth mindset, a phrase Dr. Dweck coined, I see myself as being capable of change and improvement. Skills or talents I don’t have today, with effort, time, and feedback from others, I can develop. If I wish to hone, sharpen, or blunt a trait, that opportunity lays before me.

I believe that our Jewish tradition is essentially of the growth mindset, and the work that we do each fall at the High Holy Days is exhibit A. We are told that we can change, and we tell ourselves that we can. We spend the month of Elul examining ourselves and the ten Days of Awe

¹ Chugh, Dolly. *The Person You Mean to Be*. New York: Harper Business, 2018.

committing to do that work. Our whole idea of *teshuvah* is an expression of growth mindset, that we can develop better versions of ourselves, learn to keep in check our evil inclinations, our *yetzer hara*, as we make our way through our years of life.

Not that it is easy. That's where Dr. Chugh's work is so insightful. She identifies why it's so hard. It's hard because challenging ourselves to improve means we have to admit to ourselves that there are parts of ourselves that are lacking, that there are parts of ourselves that we know are, well, bad. And we can't change that right away; it takes time. So what does that mean? It means that we have to sit in that uncomfortable space of knowing that there are parts of us that are not "good," that we are people who are less than "good." That conflicts with our sense of self that says, "I am a good person!" Too often, Dr. Chugh explains, rather than sit in that discomfort, we panic and look for a way out. Our fight or flight response kicks in, and we fight the notion that we are less than "good." "It can't be me," we tell ourselves, and instead we blame others, tell ourselves that their actions caused our reactions, that it's their fault, not ours. We make excuses for why the work of improvement that we need to do doesn't *really* need to be done. I know this, because I experience it first-hand.

Spending the greater part of the last 18 months home with my kids, my patience with them has, at times, run thin. I love my kids, everything about them, except this one thing. I don't know if its unique to them or not; for those of you who ever had an eight-year-old, or a five-year-old, or a three-year-old daughter living with you, maybe you can answer that for me. Because the thing I struggle the most with them as that sometimes they just...don't...listen. This wonderful attribute they have, selective aural engagement, manifests in several ways. They have the ability, if they so choose, to completely turn off their ear canals, and the words I say bounce off of their skulls,

dissipating into the ether. Sometimes, the words actually do enter into one ear, and then immediately exit the other. I know when that happens: I ask them to do something, they say “Yes, daddy,” and then proceed to do anything but that. Sometimes they tease me into thinking it worked, that they heard me ask them to brush their teeth. They walk over into the bathroom, pick up the toothbrush, look at themselves in the mirror, and then get distracted, drop the toothbrush, and turn around and walk away.

So now you know all the reasons, all of the rationalizations, all of the explanations I have as to why I lose my patience with my children. I ask that you please share them with her honor the judge at my trial, giving testimony to my acknowledgment of the situation. If only my children would be better listeners, I wouldn't run out of patience.

Of course I know better than that. Maybe not in the moment, but on this powerfully awe-filled day, this day *Norah V'Ayom*, this day when we look at the snapshots of who we are and examine them for flaws, we see them. I know that I need to work on my patience. But too often when we realize that something about ourselves needs improvement, we fail to do it. Why? We're good people, we know right from wrong. But year after year we come to Rosh HaShanah with a list of improvements we want to make, and if you're anything like me, your list looks a lot like my list from last year, or the year before, or the year before. In her work, Dr. Chugh spent a lot of time focusing on an issue that has become a perennial concern: race and racial inequalities. She set out to explore why good, moral-minded folks struggle so much with understanding and internalizing what communities of color have been trying to get across to the larger population. Good people are empathetic for the plight of others, she reminded us. Good people don't engage in behavior that exacerbates inequality. And we're good people! But, when we spend time really looking at the

realities of racial inequality in this country, it's hard not to conclude that most of us, at times, are contributing, usually unwittingly and unaware, to exacerbating those inequalities. So what, then, do good people do about it?

The acclaimed author Jodi Picoult wondered the same thing.² Her *New York Times* bestselling books often focus on moral issues of the day, like LGBTQ rights, assisted dying, or the Holocaust. But when she tried to write a book about racial inequalities, she struggled. She struggled because she didn't really understand the forces at play, and learning them was challenging for her. As it is for most white Americans. It certainly has been for me. Over the past few years, led by members of our congregation, together we have read books and articles, listened to podcasts, visited historical sites, and met with leaders from neighboring communities of color, all in an attempt to better understand the forces at play our community that seek to reinforce inequalities of opportunity in generation after generation. It's not always easy, in part because the privileges that members of advantaged groups enjoy are not always visible to them. The psychologist, author, and former professional basketball player John Amaechi pointed something out that is absolutely brilliant: "White privilege," he said in discussing racial bias in the workplace, "and indeed all privilege, is actually more about the absence of inconvenience, the absence of an impediment or challenge. And as such, when you have it, you really don't notice it. But when it's absent, it affects everything you do."³ Amaechi puts his finger on something so important to understanding how privilege operates, that it manifests not as advantages experienced by the privileged party, but as disadvantages by the dis-privileged. What that means is that recognizing our privilege is incredibly

² As told in Chapter 6, "Keep Your Eyes Open, Anyway," in *The Person You Mean to Be*, by Dolly Chugh, published in 2018.

³ <https://www.ted.com/podcasts/worklife/building-an-anti-racist-workplace-transcript>

difficult, and realizing that we are contributing to it is even harder. Then, our fear takes over, our fear of being that person who isn't "good." That's what held Jodi Picoult back, until she realized something else about being a good person: Being a good person means that you are compelled to improve yourself, *and you know that you can*. Rather than letting her anxiety about wanting to be seen as a good person get in the way of her seeing the truth about herself, she utilized her commitment to being a good person to challenge herself to improve. Good people, she realized, are not flawless. Good people want to fix their flaws.

That reality is what the High Holy Day season is all about. *Cheshbon nefesh*, looking honestly at ourselves, is done so that we can identify the flaws. Doing *teshuvah* is fixing them. "You do not wish the death of sinners, but urge them to return from their ways and live," we read in *Unetaneh Tokef*. Addressing the racial inequality in our world is a task beyond any one of us individually, but we all have a role to play. As the famous teaching from Rabbi Tarfon reminds us, we are not obligated to finish the work, but we cannot ignore it either.⁴ So I ask myself, if only my children would be better listeners, I wouldn't run out of patience? Is the problem really that my daughters are obstinate? No. That's just an excuse, the ultimate defense mechanism, to shield myself from the difficulty of confronting the reality that I know to be true.

As much, or as little, as my children might listen to what I ask or say to them, my children do not lose my patience. I do. I am responsible for that. That is my work of *teshuvah* in this new year, along with all of the rest.

⁴ Avot 2:16

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In a few moments we will hear the cries of the shofar, meant to awaken us from our slumber, shake us out of the comfortable path we have set for ourselves. The calls go from the wholeness of *T'kia*, to the broken *Shevarim*, to the shattered *Teruah*...and back to whole. So is the journey of *teshuvah*. We think we are whole, only to have that reality broken when we are confronted with the truth of our opportunities for growth. It is scary, challenging, perhaps even painful to look so intently at who we are and resolve to push through the discomfort that really improvement takes. But, just as the calls of the shofar resolve back to *t'kiah*, so too can we be made whole. And not just whole, but greater than before, *t'kiah g'dolah*, a better version of ourselves. *Ken Yihi Ratzon*, may this be God's will for us all.