

Temple Israel
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Making Progress Through Confrontation

In thinking about our New Year's festivities this past week, there is no doubt some glaring differences between it and our secular New Year occurring in a few months. We probably did not count down for Rosh Hashanah and watch our favorite local channel with anticipation as a glowing fruit dropped from Times Square to the count of ten. We probably did not enjoy toasting this Rosh Hashanah with a little bubbly and a kiss. We probably did not stay home, at least I hope not, to watch football all day. Yet, with the many differences, one aspect of Rosh Hashanah and December 31st is closely linked – the idea of the New Year's resolution.

The New Year's resolution provides Americans an opportunity to reflect on our past mistakes and then improve upon them in the upcoming year, which for Jews correlates with the process we go through with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We contemplate the wrongs we committed over this past year and seek ways to be a better person. According to the US government, these are the top twelve resolutions in no particular order that people commit to in a year:

Lose weight, manage debt, save money, get a better job, get fit, get a better education, drink less, quit smoking, reduce stress overall, reduce stress at work, take a trip, and volunteer to help others¹

Yet, depending on the research we look at by the end of the year between 80 and 95 percent of people who made a resolution on New Year's Eve do not follow through with it. More staggering, 30 to 40 percent of Americans "throw in the towel" at the end of January and only about 20 percent still commit to their resolutions six months after it was made.

¹ http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/New_Years_Resolutions.shtml

Today is Shabbat Shuvah, which is the intermediary Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and is named for the first word of this weekend's special haftarat in Hosea. *Shuvah* plays on the word, *teshuvah*, which is indicative of the repentance we ask for during these days of atonement. We have been taught through this period that we should repent for our sins and set goals to make certain that we do better in the upcoming year. Yet, similar to the New Year's Resolution, how can we guarantee that we follow through with our objectives for personal betterment?

A lot of times we make unrealistic expectations or goals for ourselves. A habitual spender decides they will save everything. A non-exerciser immediately goes to the gym seven days a week. An over-stressed person decides today is the day he will no longer succumb to stress. This pattern of extreme change, no matter the situation, is difficult to accomplish. We are creatures of habit and drastic adjustments in our daily routine can cause even more stress and revert us back to where we feel most comfortable, such as: not exercising, holding on to stress, and shopping. However, finding a way to follow through with the goals we set can be found in the literal meaning of *shuvah*.

Meaning, to return, *shuvah* functions as a spiritual alarm clock. It wakes us up! It reminds us that change takes time, and that we need to take baby steps rather than gigantic leaps. Some of us might want to begin exercising, so instead of jumping right into six days a week program, why not start with one day a week? Some of us might want to reduce the stress in our daily lives, so instead of trying to get rid of all of our stresses right away, we can try to remove one thing at a time. For the shop o'holic, who desperately wants to save, instead of saving everything at once this person gradually increases the amount they put away. By more slowly and more steadily working towards our goals, when a diversion might corner us, we can more easily and more quickly *shuvah*, return to our designated path. As we think about the goals we establish for ourselves at this time, may we not become another failed statistic, but rather through *shuvah* begin to make progress in those areas that we are willing to confront.