

We began singing them in early August, on Rosh Chodesh Av, the words from Lamentations, words that appear in every Torah service: *Hashiveinu, hashiveinu Hashem eilecha v'nashuvah. Chadeish yameinu k'kedem*. "Return us to You, Hashem, and we will return. Renew our days as of old."

We will sing these words many times before the High Holiday season is over. In some ways, this is the central prayer of the season of repentance: a prayer for return; a prayer for renewal. We pray for the Divine to pull us back into a state of greater purity, greater innocence, perhaps naiveté. For each of, "renew our days as of old" probably has a slightly different valence.

And yet, to return to an idealized state of innocence is impossible. For all that we beg for this idealized return, our tradition demands growth, rather than erasure. Masechet Brachot of Babylonian Talmud teaches, "A *tzaddik* cannot stand at the level of a *baal teshuvah*," which is to say, a person whose whole life has been innocent and pure is actually at a lower spiritual level than a person who has done wrong, and done *teshuvah*; repentance, return. Such a person does not return to their previous state; rather, this person has actually grown in their spirituality because of their journey.

What if we all take the High Holiday season as an opportunity to become *baalei teshuvah*? To use this time of reflection to channel our griefs, our challenges, our mistakes, into spiritual growth? With the holidays being as late as they are this year, it is my hope that we all can take the month of Elul, which begins Sept. 4th and ends with erev Rosh Hashanah, as time of reorientation and reflection. Whether we attend the synagogue's High Holiday preparation classes or engage in personal practices such as study, meditation, or daily sounding the shofar, we can use this season to awaken ourselves. Perhaps we can become *baalei teshuvah*: not innocent as if our mistakes and our hurts never were, but renewed with greater spiritual growth because of the harvest of our experiences.