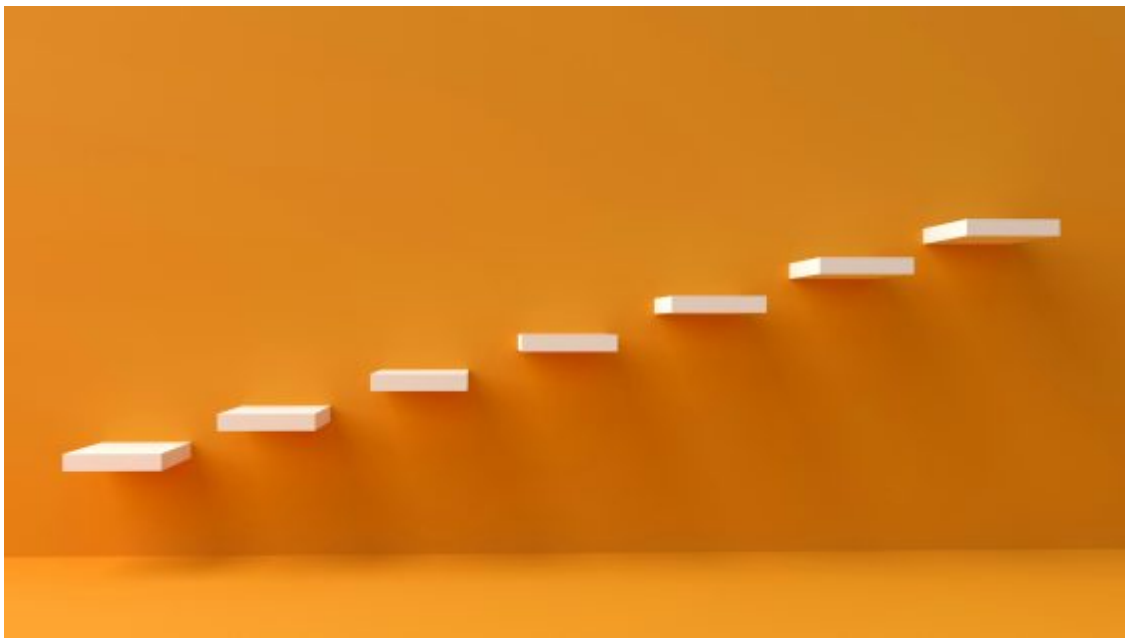
Non-Linear Teshuva



The kids are up, fed, and at daycare. I've already emptied and restarted the dishwasher. My wife is on a Zoom meeting in the other room. Finally, I'm alone in my office. An Artscroll Siddur sits on the desk before me, and I open my tefillin bag to retrieve the kippah that lives inside. I know when to start and end and which direction to face (towards the bookshelf behind my desk), because my local rabbi kindly recommended the MyZmanim app. I don't quite understand what 12 or 11 degrees, or 52 or 48 minutes has to do with davening, but "Earliest tallis," "Latest Shema," and "Latest Shacharis" are clear enough boundaries.

Although I wear a kippah for davening, I don't wear one throughout the day. Sometimes I worry if my teshuva is developing properly, and if I'm moving any closer to *the derech*. Can I wrap tefillin and really daven if I don't wear a kippah all of the time? What business does a non-kippah wearing, non-*shomer kashrut*, non-*shomer Shabbos* Jew have with tefillin, *tallis*, kippah, and Siddur?

A local friend of mine, also on a teshuva journey, decided to begin wearing a kippah full time. We compared notes on a phone call one afternoon. I shared my anxieties about bringing tefillin through airport security, and wondered aloud if it would be appropriate to wrap on an airplane. He shared that after initial coworker confusion and curiosity, his kippah was a largely uneventful adaptation, less the person who shouted “Free Palestine” at him from a hospital staff stairwell before running off, unidentified. The harassment didn’t seem to bother him.

One of our rabbis recommended wearing *tzitzit*, but neither of us do.

I put the kippah atop my head and ensure the clip is property secured. Reaching out to my right, I pick up the oversized *tallit gadol* waiting on the side table. I used Eichler’s online calculator to determine which style and size to buy. When it arrived I was eager to practice putting it on properly—Chabad has a fantastic short video on the subject—only to find I drastically overestimated my height.

It’s ok, I rationalize. Who hasn’t occasionally felt closer to six feet than reality prescribed? I chuckle at myself and my *tallit* super-*gadol*. I now know how to fold it properly over each shoulder without the *tzitzit* dragging on the ground. Lesson learned, I tell myself. I’m prepared if I ever need to borrow a *tallis* at the NBA draft.

Encapsulating myself, I push the muted dishwasher noises and faint laughter coming from the other room out of my mind, preparing to wrap my tefillin.

I’ll admit, upon deciding to daven regularly, reaching out to my rabbi to locate tefillin, asking for *tallis* suggestions, and even clarifying what I should do each morning, I spent far too much time worrying about being perceived as an amateur.

What a shame, I over-analyzed, it would be to find oneself living out the famous story of historical Cargo Cults. Those indigenous communities in Melanesia, who after exposure to early 20th-century Western colonialism, particularly the arrival of airplanes with abundant cargo filled with modern goods, went on to build bamboo airplanes, towers, and radio stations, and continuously act out the functions of an early 20th-century airstrip in the hopes of summoning arriving cargo. Of course, cargo never arrived.

My fear is illegitimacy—going through the motions with a kind of unpracticed awkwardness, totally unable to call up actual, real-life tefilla. In short, I’m afraid of doing it wrong.

But what is real tefilla? As I develop my faith and practice, I'm sure to make errors. Does Hashem mind my ignorance and my awkwardness?

I recall a refrain from Pirkei Avos:

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, הֱוֵי זָהִיר בִּקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּבַתְּפִלָּה. וּכְשֶׁאַתָּה מִתְפַּלֵּל, אַל תַּעַשׂ תְּפִלָּתְךָ קֶבַע, אֶלָּא רַחֲמִים וְתַחֲנוּנִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יואל ב) כִּי חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל הָרָעָה. וְאַל תְּהִי רָשָׁע בִּפְנֵי עַצְמְךָ

Rabbi Shimon said: Be careful with the reading of Shema and the prayer, And when you pray, do not make your prayer something automatic, but a plea for compassion before God, for it is said: "for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment" (Joel 2:13); **And be not wicked in your own esteem.**

Rabbi Shimon's assertion to "be not wicked in your own esteem" is rendered ever more meaningful by the commentary from Rambam:

כשיחשוב אדם עצמו חסר ופחות לא יגדל בעיניו חסרון שיעשהו

When a man thinks of himself as lacking [virtue] and low, **a lacking will not seem [too] big in his eyes for him to do it.**

Per Rambam, low self-image is itself a form of justification or allowance to not perform your best. I push thoughts of illegitimacy out of my head and focus on seeing myself as complete, giving no excuse to give less than my best.

I resume my morning practice—my confidence building. It is a comforting (and seemingly universal) truth in Jewish thought, that any doubt, anxiety, or fear you have today, has already been felt by a rabbi of antiquity, and a book or commentary has been written on the matter. Tefillin are wrapped. I ask myself: What comes next? The answer, most literally, is Shacharis. First to morning blessings, the *Akeidah*, *Mizmor Shir*, *Pesukei Dezimrah*, *Ashrei,* and onwards.

When I daven, my Hebrew is remedial. I switch between English, Hebrew, and the occasional transliteration as verses and cantorial tones from my Reform childhood re-awaken with fervor (Shema, *Shmonei Esrei,* and *Aleinu* to name a few). Other prayers evoke no melody in my mind.

My strategy—if one can have a davening strategy—is simple: Hebrew, with full understanding, is the goal. If I can read but don't understand, I recite the Hebrew and read the English. If I can't read fluently in Hebrew, I follow the English and jump to the transliteration, trying to sound out familiar words and phrases. If the prayer is entirely new to me, I focus on the English alone, reflecting that Hebrew is my goal, and that Hashem would much rather have me absorbed within His presence than avoiding tefilla altogether, lost in the banalities of the morning. I learned that the Shulchan Aruch agrees with me on this one.

As I finish the Song of the Day and begin to pack up, I always plan to go back through the Siddur later, to practice key prayers, to read through the notes once more, but the day rapidly consumes me and I find myself struggling to find the tools I need.

Yet, the Linear Siddur is irreplaceable; the Orthodox Union has done a wonderful job in arrangement and annotations. It guides me each morning with descriptions, intentions, historical examples, and preferred actions that bring the prayers to life. I study them, awakening each weekday morning and retiring to my office to begin again.

I recall the declaration at Sinai, *naase v'nishma*—we will do and we will understand—and my doubt of the legitimacy of my prayer is gone. Hashem offered forgiveness and immense patience at Sinai, receiving a declaration of daily action and effortful improvement in exchange from Israel, not perfection.

In this sense, there is no next step or *derech* in my teshuva. I am, just like the Jews at Sinai, offering an earnest and best effort each morning, a daily renewal of the covenant, a decision to do and understand.

While my Siddur is linear, my teshuva is most definitely not.