

Shanah Tovah.

Flares.

Also known as bell bottoms, loon pants and elephant bells. Pants that get wider from the knee down. They came into use in the 19th century with the US Navy when there was no uniform yet, and then was adopted by the British Royal Navy by the mid 19th century. Wide legged pants that could be rolled up were practical. Then, they came into fashion in the 1960's and 1970's, and thanks to folks like Sonny and Cher, John Travolta, and Go Go dancers, they became popular.

Flares came back in style in the 1990's under the name of "boot cut", cut a little narrower above the knee and flared out a little less. And now, according to Elle magazine, the flare trouser is back once again in 2022 in all kinds of corduroy, leather, crochet and classic denim designs.

We could say, flares are back! They have returned. But they aren't just a repeat of what we have seen before. If we were to hold up trousers from 2022, 1992 and 1972, they wouldn't be exactly the same, and certainly, they would differ quite a bit from the original sailor wear of the 19th century. Sure, they would have the similar flare below the knee, but in every case there would be differences, nuances, ways that those pants reflect their time and other elements of fashion, technology, and practicality of the decade from which they came. Styles return, but not exactly in the same form as they were before.

That is the nature of everything that returns. We often think of return as "going back" or a kind of redo, but it isn't entirely like that, because nothing is completely the same upon return. There are always differences. The situation is different, the specifics are different. Lessons are learned, experiences had, new information revealed. If we drop a good habit and return to it, we now have a deeper appreciation for why we do it so our experience of it is not the same. If we drop a bad habit and then return to it, we are likely to have a little more guilt and regret associated with that habit. If we decide on option a in a choose your own adventure book and we don't like it, we can return to the page with the options, but following b will now be in comparison to the a adventure.

Return is a major focus on Yom Kippur. We gather in the process of teshuvah, which is commonly translated as repentance, but more literally is translated as return. During this season, we return to all kinds of things. We return to this commemoration, this service, this ritual, this space. We return to reflection, prayer, and community. Why do we focus on return? Because we know that whenever something returns, it is different. We have returned, and we are different. And we want to identify what is different, to understand what has changed, and determine what that means for us as we move forward with our lives.

We can see the changes upon return when we look at the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai. The first time Moses goes up to receive the tablets on behalf of the people, it is a relatively straightforward affair. He goes up, God speaks the law to him, he writes it down on stone tablets and then comes down to deliver it to the people. However, we know that when he descends the mountain, he finds the people reveling and dancing around a golden calf. In his anger and frustration, he smashes the tablets, grinds down the calf made of gold, and those who participated are punished.

And then, Moses breaks down a little. We hear how difficult this role is, to lead the Israelites, and it is taking its toll on him. He speaks in anguish of how hard his task has been, and he needs something special from God to continue. Moses cries out and asks God to see God's face. He needs something tangible. In recognizing the weight of Moses's responsibility and that

he is in need, God says that, though he cannot see God's face, God's presence can pass before Moses if Moses hides in a crag in a rock and Moses will be able to see God's back, and he does. Later, we are told that Moses returns to the mountain to obtain the law once again.

After the golden calf incident, and after Moses has seen God's presence, everyone involved has been changed by what they went through together. It was traumatic. There was a real risk that everything would fall apart. That the exodus would have been for nothing; that there could be no covenant if the people couldn't follow what was expected of them. So when Moses goes back up the mountain, his return visit is much more powerful. This time, he begins with an elaborate praise. "*Adonai, Adonai, el rachum v'chanun*. The Eternal One, the Eternal God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7) And in response, God says, "I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will work such wonders as have not been wrought on all the earth or in any nation; and all the people who are with you shall see how awesome are the Eternal's deeds which I will perform for you" (Exodus 34:10). Moses then writes a second set of tablets and he descends the mountain. This time, his skin is radiant and shining from the experience, and in that state he was able to share the contents of the law with the people. And the people began to hear it.

The return trip could not just be a do over. It was going to be a different experience because what had happened had changed everyone, Moses, the people, and even God. Trust was broken and restored, apologies made and forgiveness granted. And in this instance, though what happened was negative, when Moses returned, the people and God were able to reaffirm their commitments to each other, making what appears to be a stronger bond for having gone through the difficulty. Moses literally shines brighter and has a different outlook because he returned to the mountain to get a second set of tablets.

It was doing the very same action again that makes it easy to identify how different the return trip was for Moses. The return activity highlights the difference in mindset. Ritual, thus, is useful to help measure what is different. The nature of ritual is that it doesn't change. It is the same all the time, every single year. Think of the language of the vidui, the confessional section of our liturgy. Every year, we read the same list of sins. But, sometimes, different sins may stand out more than others, maybe it speaks to something in our more recent behavior, or someone else's we have observed. Perhaps something stands out in another part of the liturgy, we notice something in it we have never noticed before. The liturgy, this ritual doesn't change, but we do. So if a line of prayer, or a reading, or a melody landed differently this year, if we suddenly understood something that did not seem significant in years past, it is because something has changed in us. We experience something new in the prayers we have said year after year. Did you notice anything different this year? What does that say about how have changed?

Within Judaism, this yearly return to Yom Kippur enables us to plan when and how we measure how we have changed. We plan the return, knowing that we will make mistakes, and in fact, we plan for them. We know we will do things wrong, so we plan to discern what that does to us through return.

Think of the prayer, Kol Nidre. We just annulled all the vows that we will make in this coming year, in case we can't fulfill them, even before we have had the opportunity to try to fulfill them. Whether it is realistic, or pessimistic, we are planning for the mistakes we are going to make. Not that we won't work hard to fulfill the vows we make, we must. We are not released from the obligation of the vows we never intend to keep. But even when we know we will try, we also know there are likely things we won't be able to do. So, we plan for the mistakes, and we also plan the return, to come back at Yom Kippur next year, and try to understand what this last

year has been for us. So we can measure how we have changed and what that means for the vows we make for the coming year.

So, the question we must ask ourselves at this point is, what has changed? How are we different? How can we appreciate what that change means in our lives?

Has the ritual helped us identify change? Have we seen something in the prayer book that we never saw before? Has praying communally been a different experience and why?

If nothing else, we are changed because we used to take being together for prayer for granted. Think back three years ago to the last time we were in this room together for Kol Nidre. Think of what we have gone through individually. We've suffered losses, we have new fears, we have been isolated. We have discovered new ways of connecting with people, we have had to slow life down, and we've had to readjust our priorities. We have all changed, we are all different. We will have to navigate new concerns, we have to work to understand each other in new ways. Where were we and where are we now? How have we changed? How will our community be affected?

Now, think back to last year, and the promises and resolutions we made. What vows went unfulfilled? What mistakes could we have predicted that we would make? What does all that mean as we now return to this time and place?

The return helps us to recognize that we are different. And if we are different, that also means that, as we look toward the coming year, we can not make the same resolutions we have made in the past. We can not just repeat the same promises, especially the ones we were not able to keep. We know more about ourselves now, our limitations, and perhaps even our strengths. We are not the same.

So, from the experience of slowing life down, perhaps we learned to pay more attention to the details and the little things we didn't always see before. Maybe that can help us in this year's vows. Rather than thinking in big picture ways, perhaps we can focus our attention a little more. If, in the past we vowed to be more patient, perhaps we might now say that we vow to be more patient when we are explaining something to someone who does not understand. Or maybe, I vow to be better attuned to when we are flustered or stressed because we lose patience with others. Or, knowing how meaningful it has been to connect with others, whether through new means like technology, or we have developed an appreciation for others because we were kept apart so long, instead of saying we will spend more time with the people we love, perhaps we be more specific, and plan to call someone special to us on every Shabbat. Or maybe we are particularly struck by the difficulties vulnerable communities face, all of which was exacerbated by the pandemic. This year, let us vow to do good in the world by picking a cause and organization and researching ways to get involved, contribute and volunteer.

We return here every Yom Kippur to understand how we have changed. As we recognize who we are at the start of this new year, it is crucial that we integrate those changes so we can move forward in a complete way. If this year's vows do not reflect how we have changed, we will fall short of our potential for what this new year could be. Let us make sure that our return this year is not just a repeat of the past, but, rather, real movement toward leading a more honest and more purposeful life.

We are at the point of return. We are at the moment of understanding. We have the opportunity to make vows and promises about our future. May we have the wisdom to be fully aware of who we have come to be, and the strength to move forward, changed and whole.

