

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Essential Thoughts for the New Year

Of all the confessions we make on Yom Kippur, I have a minor one to share: I have not read all the books on my bookshelves, either at home or at the temple. Sometimes, I get a book because I like the title, or someone recommends it, or I read a book review and think, "I can really learn something from that book." And then, life gets in the way and I don't get around to finishing reading it; sometimes I don't even start. But there it is on my shelf, ready for when I'm ready.

As I prepare to start each New Year with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I often look toward this reading material for inspiration. Sometimes I try to get inspired for sermons or writing, but sometimes, it's just to get "in the mood" for a new spiritual beginning. I don't always need to read the whole book to find tidbits that will help my preparation of mind and heart. Sometimes, just the title can provide interesting food for thought. One of my favorite book titles, that has a built-in lesson is *You Don't have to be Wrong or Me to Be Right*, by Rabbi Brad Hirschfield. The subtitle is *Finding Faith without Fanaticism*. Rabbi Hirschfield gives many examples from his own life, but you almost don't have to read it all to try to take the book title as a motto. I find that when I live by the notion expressed in that statement, I can maintain my own sense of truth without having to dispute someone else's...leading to peaceful communication and acceptance.

This year, I found on my shelf a book I hadn't yet read by a favorite author. Rabbi Harold Kushner's best known work is *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Written in 1983, it was, in part, a response to the death of his 14 year-old son, Aaron. Aaron had an incurable illness that gave him limitations his entire life. Kushner, through his own grief, tries to focus on what Aaron COULD do, rather than what he COULDN'T do, trying to embrace the fourteen years of a dynamic, loving relationship with his sweet, funny and insightful son rather than continue to lament about "what could have been." He admits that it is far from easy.

Now over 80 years old, Rabbi Kushner's most recent publication (most of his 14 books are bestsellers) is called *Nine Essential Things I've Learned from Life*. As I read this man's wisdom with pen highlighter ready, it occurred to me that each of the nine chapters includes a title that is worthy of thought. Kushner provides quite a bit of scholarly information, but also gives personal reflections to make it real. I began to think about how these topics are real for me. Whether or not you ever read this book, contemplating the topics of the chapter titles will give you an interesting way to look at your own past and future. Here's what Rabbi Kushner got me thinking about, the nine chapter titles of his own "essential" nuggets of learning:

1. Lessons I've learned along the way.
2. God is not a man who lives in the sky.
3. God does not send the problem; God sends us the strength to deal with the problem.
4. Forgiveness is a favor you do yourself.
5. Some things are just wrong; knowing that makes us human.
6. Religion is what you do, not what you believe.
7. Leave room for doubt and anger in your religious outlook.
8. To feel better about yourself, find someone to help.
9. Give God the benefit of the doubt.

By just contemplating one or more of these topics, relating the idea to our own lives and philosophy, we can begin the New Year with a deeper connection with God and with each other.

L'shalom and Shana Tova, for a sweet beginning and an inspirational New Year,

Rabbi Dan Gordon