

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Making the New Year New

Why is this year different from all other years? Yes, this is like the opening of the Four Questions of the Passover Seder. On Passover, we say, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" But Passover is a week, not a night. It is a week that we remember our oppression and appreciate our freedom. Likewise, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are not merely singular days on the calendar. They are meant to inspire us, not for a day, or even ten days...but all year long. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, a man who began life as a Hasid and later motivated a generation with his music, composed the following song as a way to begin a year:

*Return again...return again...return to the land of your soul.
Return to who you are; Return to what you are; Return to where you are...
Born and reborn again...return again...return again...*

This song focuses on the Hebrew concept of *teshuvah*, which we understand to mean "repentance," but literally means "return." In the traditional liturgy on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we wonder, "Who shall live and who shall die?" We plead for G-d's mercy, hopefully stating that "*tefilah, tzedakah, v'teshuva* – prayer, charity and repentance – will temper a severe decree."

If repentance and return are synonymous, to what are we returning? In Rabbi Carlebach's song, we return to our soul and to our past, somehow starting over again. The slow, pensive music he composed implies that this *teshuvah*, this return, is an ongoing, never-ending process. The liturgy implies that our actions make a difference in the way G-d delivers justice and mercy. I suggest that it might be more about our own behavior than about G-d's actions. If we are hoping to "temper a severe decree," maybe it's not about avoiding severe circumstances; it's about embracing even the most difficult times with a kind of peace and calm that helps us through.

As I've been mentally and emotionally preparing for the New Year, I've been thinking about this concept of return. Our normal way of aging is to move forward, not backwards. We hope to grow and change for the better. We want to learn from our mistakes and become better people based on what we have learned. Where is there room for a return?

Children help us remember that level of return. Remember the excitement of marveling at something new? I'm taken back to my youth when I hear a question I've never heard before, or see that "aha!" look when a child "gets it." Bar and bat mitzvah students often amaze me when they discover an aspect of Torah I hadn't before considered. We might think "There is nothing new under the sun," as suggested in the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:9), but every day someone – often a child – uncovers a new truth. When the Jewish Americana musician, Joe Buchanan led a service at Temple Beth Torah, he said, "This exact combination of people and voices has never before been together and never will be again." Each moment is a new, unique opportunity.

On Yom Kippur, we contemplate where we've sinned and how we've fallen short of complete goodness and innocence. Perhaps the return we long for is a return to the innocence of our youth. Return to remembering to what it's like to find something new, to learn something exciting and invigorating, making us want to shout, "Wow!" Rediscovering the innocence we had when assumed that each new person we meet is a potential friend, and not someone who might be out to get us.

Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister and author, wrote:

All I ever really needed to know I learned in kindergarten.

Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain but there in the sandbox at nursery school. These are the things I learned:

- *Share everything.*
- *Play fair.*
- *Don't hit people.*
- *Put things back where you found them.*
- *Clean up your own mess*
- *Don't take things that aren't yours.*
- *Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*
- *Wash your hands before you eat.*
- *Flush.*
- *Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.*
- *Live a balanced life.*
- *Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.*

Our lives may be more complicated than the lives of five-year-olds. But there is certainly a lot of simple wisdom in the wonder of childhood that can lead us to a beautiful return; returning to embrace the wonder and newness of life.

Shana Tova – Happy New Year! I look forward to sharing it with you.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

