

## EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5770

### Redefining High Holy Day Themes TESHUVAH, TEFILLAH, TZEDAKAH

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My favourite part of celebrating our High Holy Days here in Wellington, New Zealand, has less to do with contemplative poetry and wisdom that emerges from our special liturgies and more to do with the accident of the internationally recognized date and time line stretching across the planet. I revel in the quiet, internal knowledge that we might be the first Jews in the world to greet one another with "Shanah tovah!" We might be the first Jews in the world to sound the Shofar! How cool is that?

Of course, part of being first is being observed by others waiting to go next, setting the example for those who come later, not to mention ultimately summoning up the courage simply to get the ball rolling..

Our sages remind us that as individuals each and every one of our deeds is judged everyday and the entire world is judged every year on Rosh Hashanah.

Serious questions emerge: Who does the judging? What does it mean to be judged? And, what are the standards against which judging takes place?

It's one thing to envelop ourselves in ancient and medieval liturgical poetry that suggests the masses passing before the Holy Throne in heaven, like sheep passing through the gate of a station.

It's another to believe it happens that way. Truthfully, while the metaphor is powerful, few of us seriously believe in prosecuting angels.

Perhaps because it is still novel to me as a recent resident in the Antipodes, being first in the chain of Shofar sounds across the planet that will soon commence reminds me, personally, of the fact that every single word I utter and every single act to which I commit my efforts is first in an infinite chain of events that will follow. We've all experienced something we call serendipity or coincidence, good timing or bad timing, when seemingly disparate chains of events intersect and we reap either benefit or injury as a result.

I think what makes us different from plants and other animals on earth is our capacity to observe ourselves, to review events in our minds, engage our imaginations to re-vision those events, and finally to adjust our behaviour accordingly to maintain responses we like and to avoid responses we don't like.

In the language of our tradition, of Judaism, it is the very inner work of the High Holy Day season - Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - to recall episodes of our lives' journeys and imagine them differently than the way they actually occurred.

In Genesis our mythological patriarch, Jacob, recognizes that he can step outside his own sense of self. After cheating his brother Esau of birthright and blessing and having to run away to save himself from Esau's vengeance; resting the first night he sets camp; sleeping with a rock as a pillow; Jacob dreams about a ladder, rooted in the earth and also reaching the heavens. He awakes and says, "God was in this place and I, I never before recognized it."

*Yesod HaAvodah*, a Chasidic commentary from the region called Belorus, teaches that Jacob's ladder illustrates our special status as human beings in the greater scheme of the creation. The "ladder set into the ground, but whose head reaches heaven<sup>1</sup>," illustrates human agency. We are physical beings, rooted in our physical experience AND STILL, we have this unique capacity to metaphorically step outside ourselves and witness ourselves in relationship with the planet and others. Who judges? We do.

Our essential human capacity to reflect and measure our deeds makes abstract concepts such as justice, goodness, fairness, kindness, and love possible. It is our capacity to decide how to conduct ourselves that Judaism (and I believe all faiths) seek to understand and better utilize for the benefit of how we spend our time on the planet as well as for the benefit of our children and future generations.

For all the poetry and imagery that attempts to capture the essence of the ineffable we inadequately describe as God or the Divine or Lord or Hashem, the point and purpose of religion is to generate insight on ourselves and how we might better achieve the abstract concepts we value in society.

Our ancient Rabbi Hillel's well known Golden Rule states: What is hateful to you do not do to others; all the rest is commentary, go and learn. Religion, in general (Judaism, for us) is about managing ourselves in relationship with others and the planet. All the rest is commentary, and as Hillel instructs, go and learn!

Our sages remind us that as individuals each and every one of our deeds is judged everyday and the entire world is judged every year on Rosh Hashanah.

Who does the judging? We do. How do we judge? The very liturgy we pray in synagogues all over the world

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:12

points us in, if not the right direction, at least a tenable one.

*UTshuvah, utfillah, utzdakah maavirin et ro'a hagzayrah - Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah temper Judgements severe decree.*

**Teshuvah** - Repentance - Return - The practice of returning to core values and ideals, studying them, discussing them, understanding them, growing them with time and technology.

**Tefillah** - Prayer - Contemplation - the practice of reflecting on our own recurring thoughts, words, and deeds in relationship to the abstract concepts, the core values and ideals we do indeed share across cultural, religious, and social and economic realities.

**Tzedakah** - not Charity, but Justice - the practice of doing right by one another and the planet, not sometimes, not only when others are looking, but all the time.

Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah temper judgement's severe decree. What is judgement's severe decree if not the consequences of our unchecked conduct? Global warming? AIDS? Financial systems collapse?

Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah temper judgement's severe decree. Returning to core values and ideals, reflecting on our own recurring thoughts, words, and deeds in relationship to our core values and ideals, and doing right by one another and the planet - temper judgement's severe decree.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written. On Yom Kippur it is sealed. Divinity is our humanity realized, practiced, and harvested - one person, one thought, one word, one deed at a time. Each one setting into motion its own infinite chain of consequential events intersecting with other chains of consequential events.

Call it serendipity or coincidence, good timing or bad timing, reward or punishment. Our voluntary practice of Judaism calls us to pay attention to the choices we make in our thinking, speaking, and doing.

Ultimately we are, each and every one of us, equally vulnerable to time and place, accidents in the universe and consequences of our own actions, as well as the actions of others. Judgement's severe decree is nothing short of our experience in this life. We have the capacity to imagine great things. We have the capacity to speak words of kindness and truth. We have the capacity to do good deeds, inspire confidence, and diminish the collective whole of pain and suffering.

L'shanah tovah tikatayvu, May we be inscribed this year, for goodness and well-being, satisfaction with our lot, companionship and love, support and inspiration. Ken y'hi ratzon...