

I recall one of the visiting scholars who came to Springfield many years ago under the auspices of the Jewish Federation and the two congregations bemoaning the fact that Jews who are once-a-year participants in congregational life choose Yom Kippur as the one occasion to attend synagogue. What a skewed and distorted experience of Judaism they get! If you're going to observe only one holiday, why not choose Sukkot -when you can enjoy meals outdoors (weather permitting), smell the fragrance of the citron, and rejoice in the gifts of the harvest - or Purim with its license to imbibe and its venerable tradition of parody, satire and masquerade? These are not occasions lacking in religious significance. Sukkot teaches the importance of gratitude, and Purim highlights the utility of laughter as a mechanism for survival, but the lessons are imparted in an upbeat and pleasurable manner. Why attend only on Yom Kippur, when we refrain from food and drink for 24 hours, and spend the entire day in synagogue cycling through endless repetitions of the same prayers, stressing the somber themes of sin and mortality, supplemented by tales of martyrdom and accounts of an archaic sacrificial ritual? Are we Jews masochists, gluttons for punishment?

Or perhaps we have an intuitive understanding that we need Yom Kippur, that it offers us an opportunity for healing and renewal, a quiet time to contemplate the question of life's meaning and purpose. The late Rabbi Alan Lew in his volume, *This is Real and You are Totally Unprepared*, a book length Midrash on the deeper meaning of the Days of Awe, noted that frantic and ceaseless activity along with the striving to acquire power, status and possessions are often the means that people employ to affirm and validate their existence but that they also serve as an escape from confronting such daunting questions. Quiet, cessation from activity, and an opportunity for reflection and contemplation are among the blessings enjoyed by those who observe Shabbat as a weekly day of rest. Yom Kippur, this Sabbath of Sabbaths, offers us an extended interval of quiet, unburdened by the responsibilities of work, business, home maintenance and management, away from the busy whirl of social life, when we can focus on the spiritual (indeed tradition likens us on Yom Kippur to angels) and grapple with the big questions of meaning and purpose.

On Yom Kippur we become more keenly aware of transience and mortality. Everything that exists— in nature or the product of human invention- is subject to change,

transformation, decay and disappearance. Every individual alive will ultimately die. Viewed in the perspective of the billions of years the universe has existed, seen against the backdrop of the infinite reaches of space, our individual life spans and the circumscribed geographical setting in which we reside, work and travel seem insignificant. The prayer *Adam yesodo* in the holiday *Musaf* service expresses that sense of transience and insignificance in a series of similes: we are like a broken piece of pottery, crumbling dust, a flower that has withered, a passing shadow. In the end, our attempts at achieving significance through fame, power and possessions, and thereby dodging the ultimate questions, come to naught. In the *Ne'ilah* prayer, we ask ourselves, "What is our attainment, our power, our might?" and, addressing God, we proclaim "Compared to You, all the powerful are nothing, the famous insignificant, the wise lack wisdom, and the clever lack reason." Life, as the Psalmist tells us, flies away quickly, but even when we are alive, we experience loss and disappointment. Illness and misfortune can strike at any time, unannounced and unanticipated. Adversity and suffering touch those whom we love, and a sensitive soul cannot but be affected by the plight of those near and far who are victims of natural disaster, abject poverty, injustice and oppression, and of man's capacity for cruelty and barbarism

It is admittedly a bleak picture that I have painted but one that is faithful to the tenor of the High Holiday liturgy. Vulnerability, mortality, loss and suffering and the individual's smallness and insignificance within a vast universe are realities that have to be acknowledged if our search for meaning is to rest on a firm foundation. The words from the *Ne'ilah* which I cited are followed by a more hopeful and optimistic note, an antidote, as it were, to the bleak perspective on human life and achievement preceding it. *Aval anachnu am'cha b'nai vritecha*, "But we are Your people, the children of Your covenant." Identifying with covenant and heritage, something larger than the self, something more enduring than the individual life span, lends added significance to our lives that transcends the limited number of our years and the transient and passing nature of our attainments. Or to paraphrase the words of the old Silverman *machzor* formerly used in our congregation, "when we participate in the ongoing mission of the eternal people, we ourselves take on the aspect of eternity." A mystical sensibility (such as is found in the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah) teaches that each of us as individuals, as well

as each feature and phenomenon of the universe, is part of the unfolding of creation, all linked together by an underlying and unseen oneness and unity. To know that we participate in that oneness and in that unfolding and to be blessed with consciousness, perception, the capacity to appreciate the wonder and beauty of the universe and to understand something of its workings is likewise a path to self-transcendence, meaning and joy.

Yom Kippur is the culmination of our season of *teshuvah*, return. We seek to turn away from the frivolous and the trivial, to turn from our exclusive preoccupation with the material to an appreciation of the place of the spiritual in our lives, to return to our vision of our better self and to the ideals that we have failed to live up to during the past year. The sense of wanting to be part of something larger than the self is intrinsic to *teshuvah*, because sin, whose consequences we strive to overcome at this season, may be rightly regarded as that which alienates and estranges us from God and fellow persons.

Teshuvah, according to our tradition, is a process that begins with *cheshbon hanefesh*, a rigorous self-accounting. This inventory of the state of our souls is not easily undertaken or accomplished. It requires the capacity for self-awareness and for scrupulous honesty, the ability to see ourselves as we really are and not as we would wish to be. Fearing to admit that we are in any way less than perfect, we become ingenious fabricators of excuses and rationalizations for our behavior, masters of denial, adept at projecting our own shortcomings onto the others with whom we interact. But the good news is that we don't have to be perfect. God already knows our flaws and imperfections and is prepared to forgive us, provided we are sincerely repentant. Our Creator, who fashioned us, is familiar with our frailty and our limitations, with our temptations and with the *yetzer*, the passions that lead us astray. Knowing that God pardons and forgives makes it possible for us to forgive ourselves and to desist from torturing ourselves with guilt. But grace does not come cheaply. It requires, to begin with, that we initiate the turning, that we undertake the first move to repair our relationship with God and with fellow persons. *Teshuvah*, in Rabbinic theology, is a reciprocal process. Our turning toward the Creator, our indicating by word and by deed our desire to repent, results in God's turning toward us and facilitating our repentance.

Crucial to the process of *teshuvah* is the act of *vidui*, confessional. Rabbi Lew, in his book, wrote about the important place that the spoken word holds within Jewish tradition. God's creation of the universe was accomplished through speech. "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being." Verbalizing our sins of omission and commission makes them real, he noted, imprints them on our consciousness, and makes it more difficult for us to deny or rationalize them.

The purpose of our fasting tonight and tomorrow is to express remorse and regret for failing to live up to our potential, for taking for granted the gifts and blessings God has bestowed upon us, for hurting or using others, and for ignoring and neglecting our responsibilities to self, to family, to friends and community. The act is symbolic, the sacrifice of our comfort and perhaps a pound or two of body weight the substitute for the sacrificial offerings brought by our ancestors in olden days. I know that I have much for which I feel regret.

Sins against fellow persons, as we are all well aware, fall into a different category from sins against God. Confession and remorse must be accompanied by apology and, where appropriate, restitution to the person whose person, property, reputation or feelings have been hurt. This may or may not make up for the damage done, but the purpose, according to Rabbi Lew, is less one of compensation and more an act of validating the feelings of the other and acknowledging their hurt.

Although not explicitly mentioned in Rabbinic sources, an important part of *teshuvah* is letting go, which I would characterize as the act of spiritual and emotional de-cluttering. How many of us harbor grudges about incidents, slights, insults that transpired years and decades ago? How many of us are holding on to feelings of anger that are totally disproportionate to whatever it is that provoked our wrath? How many of us find our minds and spirits cluttered with petty jealousies and resentments? All of these negative feelings impact our relationships with others and contribute to our estrangement from them. Life is too short for feelings that embitter and isolate us and whose toxic effects harm those who harbor them more than they hurt their intended target. Nor are the negatives which we need to let go of limited to feelings regarding others. We must let go of fear, which limits our opportunities and curtails our ability to partake to the fullest of the life that God has given us. Let go of despair, which runs counter to the hopefulness

and optimism of the Jewish perspective on life – our confidence that even in the most dire of situations, meaning and purpose can be found, that joy and fulfillment are possible alongside adversity and struggle. Guilt too is to be relinquished, not just because of its adverse effect on our relationships and not only because of the pain it inflicts on our psyche, but because, as Rabbi Lew noted, it keeps us mired in the past and attached to the sins of which we seek to be cleansed and absolved at this season.

The final step of *teshuvah* is perhaps the most difficult. When confronted by the same circumstances, the same temptations that led us astray in the past, we find within ourselves the capacity to resist. Psychologists refer to the repetition compulsion, the phenomenon whereby people are drawn to reenacting the same scenario in their lives over and over out of some deep-seated and unconscious need, even though this invariably causes them profound unhappiness. If we pursue *teshuvah* with the appropriate rigor and determination (and if we are fortunate), we may gain insight into our behavior and find the capacity to break free of the hurtful and self-destructive patterns of the past.

Teshuvah is not magic. There are no shortcuts. We can't wave a wand and be rid of our sins and their consequences. The process takes time, focus, concentration and the willingness to look at truths about life and about ourselves that we would rather not see. Nor, despite the conventional understanding of the prayer *Unetaneh tokef* (that“prayer, charity and repentance avert the evil decree”) does *teshuvah* guarantee us a life of comfort, prosperity, good fortune and ease. Rabbi Lew preferred to render the word *ma'avirin* as “transform” rather than “avert.” Our penitence can not change the flow of events but can transform our understanding of them. *Kippur*, the word for atonement, actually means “cover over”. Past sins can not be eradicated, but they can be covered over and reinterpreted in a new context; rather than a recurring pattern in a life of estrangement from God and others, of selfishness, wrongdoing and offense, they become the spur to repentance and a life of virtue. We can, by repenting, open a new chapter in our personal history, placing our former transgressions in a new and different light.

The word I would like to leave you with tonight is connection. Let us cherish our connections to our Jewish heritage, to the source of our being and to the Creation of which we are part, to each other and to our community. I believe that our dependence upon God and upon each other and the fulfillment that we find in relationship are part of

the very fabric of our being, the source of meaning, joy and purpose in our lives and that through sincere repentance those nourishing and sustaining connections can be repaired and restored.