

Becoming Something (October 2005)

Not too long ago my nephew got married. In discussing our family's plan to go to the wedding, Hannah asked the question: "Is she Jewish?" "No," I replied. "Is she Christian?" Hannah came back. "No," I said. "Well what religion is she?" Hannah pressed on. "I don't think she's anything," I answered. "That's good," she concluded. "Why do you say that?" I asked. "Because now she can become something," Hannah deduced.

At the core of every religious system is the notion that one's faith and one's self are intertwined. You cannot be one thing but believe something else. That's called hypocrisy. By the same token, simply because you do not embrace a particular theology or attend a church or synagogue doesn't mean that you are nothing. On the contrary, we all are something to one extent or the other. The question is "to what extent?"

In some ways, that is the question we are all to be addressing as we enter the New Year. To what extent...? And while no doubt on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that question ought be applied to one's Jewishness—namely, to what extent am I a Jew, to what extent is my life Jewish?—it also necessitates a more expansive approach. To what extent am I a father? A mother? To what extent am I authentic to myself? Or put another way, am I really something?

The nature of life today is so demanding, from the time we enter high school until the time we retire we have so few genuine opportunities to ask these existential questions. Life just seems to take off and we're lucky if we can keep pace. From learning a craft, to making money, to raising a family, to planning retirement, life in the modern world rarely affords us the time to reflect: not what do I want to be ("...when I grow up") but who do I want to be?

Years ago I was involved in a retreat for interfaith families. The theme of the weekend was entitled "Judaism is Becoming." The double entendre was intentional. To be sure, Judaism is attractive, as a religion it has much in which people can find meaning and value. But Judaism is also a process. Not so much a way of life but a way of living (the latter term, at least for me, implying that it is something which must be done on an everyday, organic basis). Which is to say, for Judaism, life holds the ever-present potential for change, for transformation, for becoming.

This is why, for the mystics of our tradition, we are to enter these Days of Awe as if we are nothing. Not worthless, but—on the contrary—of infinite possibility. We come to the New Year as a blank slate, a something waiting to happen. But, like so much of what we teach in Judaism, what will come depends not on God but on ourselves. God has given us the soul. God has given us this spiritual oasis to nourish that soul. Whether or not we will emerge refreshed and renewed, whether or not we will become something is a question only we can answer.

Life is an opportunity. You know the rest.