

Thoughts for Erev Rosh Hashana

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
5765/2004

Tonight we gather together at the beginning of the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah*, Ten Days of Repentance to usher in these holy days. What makes them so special and how is it that they come to be so infused with a sense of holiness and awe?

I think in part, it is because we have a basic need to affirm the message of this season: This is a time of new beginnings. As a result, we are reminded that we and the world can be better.

It is a time of renewal as we assert that God created the world. Some of the prayers speak of God as a shepherd reviewing His flock, or as if we are but clay in the hands of the creator. Yet, despite these images, and in fact, precisely on account of them, we affirm the value of each individual, and of our ability to determine our fate. It is as if on these days we are summoned to look at the most difficult of all images and portraits – the self-portrait, the one we ourselves create.

As such, it is a time for each of us to reflect upon the meaning of our heritage, and of being a part of this people. Are we as faithful to Jewish tradition as we should be, as we would like to be? Are we faithful to the ideals and values of our heritage? Are we worshipping the right God? This is our chance to work on returning to the path of that which calls out across the ages. It is also the time to seek teshuvah with those people from whom we have become distanced.

In the context of these thoughts about the meaning of this day, I share with you a question recently posed to me. The person wrote:

Dear Rabbi:

I am struggling with the issue of "why should I repent, ask forgiveness and try and be a better person when everyone around me does not try to be a better a person? When every else around me is full of evil thoughts, words and deed? It is so hard to find it within myself to change and forswear bad behaviors when every day I am confronted with those who act badly against me.

The question is a difficult one. I am sure we can all relate to the feelings of frustration. In many respects, it is the essential challenge facing us at this time of year. We may feel that we are ready and willing to change, but we wonder if it is worth the effort, and we worry whether or not we will be met halfway.

We can take some comfort in knowing that the problem is not a new one. The Psalmists grappled with similar feelings, and sought refuge and strength and were sustained in their belief in a God who does not abandon the faithful.

Part of my response is that I believe with all my heart that being a good person makes us better people. It is not just a tautology. To not be a forgiving person turns us into bitter people.

I offer the example of Sherri Mandell whose son Koby was killed by Palestinians in a brutal, random and vicious act of violence.

The author of a powerful book, entitled, “The Blessing of a Broken Heart,” Sherri Mandell wrote, “Less than a year after our son was killed, my husband and I marked our wedding anniversary by going out to dinner. I can’t say we celebrated, because we were too sad. When we walked into the restaurant, the smiling waitress with her shiny, black hair had a spirit and effervescence I could only admire. I thought to myself, “She has no idea of the pain I am living with, the weight I carry.”

As my husband and I ate our meal, we realized that the restaurant was a perfect place to commemorate what would be Koby’s upcoming fifteenth birthday. We wanted to take fifteen poor or disadvantaged people out to dinner to mark Koby’s birthday – to remember the dead by bringing joy to the living.

We spoke to the manager about our plans. He said that he volunteered at a nearby center that helped teens from poor, broken families, and he thought that the teenagers would appreciate going out with us. The idea was taking form almost on its own.

(Originally), we hadn’t thought about taking teenagers out for a meal, but it made sense. Koby was a teen when he was killed. We thanked the manager for his suggestion. Before he walked away, my husband said: “Do you know the Goodman family? They live around here, and lost their 16 year old son in an accident. We went to the shiva, and I wanted to know how they are doing.”

(The manager then startled us when he told us), “You can ask them yourself. Your waitress is their daughter.”

I looked at her, at her beauty and her spirit, and I thought, “You never know what’s going on inside a person.” When she came over to our table, we told her of our loss, and she shared her own.

As we spoke, I realized how much of life is hidden. We don’t see what’s inside of people. As we shared our feelings, my husband and I felt less isolated. The pain lifted for a moment. Healing may occur when we reveal what is hidden inside of us...it brings us closer to others.”

So part of my answer to the person who asked me how to forgive others, is to realize that everyone carries their own burdens. It is impossible to know what is going on inside another person, their aches and pains, their dreams and disappointments. You certainly cannot judge others based upon exterior appearances.

The process of reaching out and of opening up to another, of being willing to take the chance and express our vulnerability is risky. But it allows for the possibility for healing to begin and can reveal untapped wellsprings of emotion.

Furthermore, moving on is an essential part of living and coming to terms with life. It allows us not to be shackled to the past.

Finally, we can learn from the story I have shared with you that we each decide how to respond to what happens to us. It is in our power to choose.

I constantly marvel how people respond to the same situation. Some individuals take a minor incident, and blow it out of proportion, and become indignant. “Can you believe that so and so did such and such...” is how it usually goes. And I have witnessed times when people are confronted with similar offenses, or even more grievous ones, yet they do not become upset. They didn’t let it get to them. Needless to say, the latter response is the healthier one.

May we use this time in the coming days to reach out to others, to our loved ones, to the good that is inside of them. It helps to ease our burdens. More importantly, it helps us discover and actualize the good within each of us, and the world, which after all is part of what we try to do during these Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah, Ten Days of Repentance.

May the days ahead be days filled with *tefillah*, with prayer, with *teshuvah*, turning and returning, and *tzedekah*, deeds of kindness and righteousness. And may the year ahead be a year of blessing and peace.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
September 15, 2004
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org