

Rosh Hashana Evening

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Rosh Hashana is a time filled with so many rich associations.

Like lovers who drift apart and for whom the distance grows with the passage of time, we may find ourselves estranged from God, from the forms of our heritage and the practice of our tradition. But unlike the couple who does not know how to find their way back to each other, we have these Ten Days – Ten Days in which we can reformulate our lives, Ten Days to return to our roots, to our people, to God, to our loved ones.

The poet Charles Angoff wrote:

Days get shorter and longer and shorter again,
But the nights are always long for the bewildered heart,
and reason becomes more irrelevant with time.

God is never near at hand, and
God is absent both night and day, always, always absent,
Despite all importunities.

Then comes the memory of a kiss, the aroma of an embrace, the soft stare of a child, the tender touch of a spring evening,
and God is here again, and all God's angels.

That is how we feel when we come back to shul on Rosh Hashana. We are reminded of the sweetness, appeal and beauty of what it means to be a Jew, and are drawn back to our heritage. One writer once described returning to shul on the holidays as similar to the couple who hears their wedding song and renews and rediscovers their love for each other as they are reminded of their wedding night.

Indeed, perhaps one of the reasons this is known as the time of return is because it offers us the chance to return to God during these Ten Days. And a lot can happen in ten days.

Take for example the story that ran not too long ago in The New York Times about college all-star football player and 2004 Heisman Trophy winner, Matt Leinart. After leading his team in an undefeated season to the national championship, he had ten days to decide whether to declare for the NFL draft or to play out his final year as quarterback of Southern California University. Ten days to make a decision of tremendous import. He had his own Aseret Yamim HaNoraim, ten days of awe.

Faced with a similar situation, most young men would not spurn the millions they would be earning, and would not want to take the chance of delaying the decision to turn pro.

But Leinart reflected during those ten days, and decided the pros would have to wait. As he told the reporter who interviewed him after he had made up his mind, "I heard people say my decision was stupid. Well, it's not stupid if you place an importance on the value of friendship, the value of being a kid...The whole college experience has become undervalued. It's an awesome time in your life, you shouldn't want to rush it."

Time and relationships --- two unquantifiable commodities, yet two extremely valuable qualities, that make life worth living, and even make sacrifice worthwhile.

So the first theme I offer for us to reflect upon this evening is to think during these Ten Days of Awe about how we can use this time for introspection and reflection. We often lament that too many of us are two or three-day a year Jews. In reality, with a little stretch, linking together the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur yields Ten Day a Year Jews. It's a start, if we but use these ten days well.

Reflect upon what is truly important, what is valued and valuable in life, what can and what cannot be replaced. And from this young man, we can surely learn a great deal about what really matters and counts in life.

Clearly one thing that cannot be replaced is life itself.

Here is where memory plays such an important role. A little more than ten days ago, we lost Simon Wiesenthal, a tireless fighter for justice. As he made clear throughout his career of tracking down Nazi war criminals and bringing them to trial, he was motivated by justice, not vengeance, which was also the title of his 1989 autobiography. He sought to bring Nazis to trial to provide moral restitution for Jews who perished in the Holocaust, and as a means of highlighting the horror of their crimes against other humans as a means of fighting and preventing anti-semitism.

Almost killed by Ukrainian soldiers who were shooting men lined up against a wall, he was spared at the last minute when church bells sounded, and an officer called out to his soldiers to attend mass. When in a concentration camp, toward the end of the war, an SS corporal told him that no one would ever believe the truth about what the Nazis had done, he was determined to survive and defy him. As he explained about his life's mission, Wiesenthal was driven by the desire to be able to go to his death knowing that he had forgotten neither the victims, nor the perpetrators.

Through his courageous work, he kept the memory of the Holocaust alive at a time when most wanted it to go away. At a time when many people wanted to forget, move on, and let bygones be bygones, to sweep embarrassing episodes aside, he showed the power and redemptive aspect of memory and the importance of holding people accountable for their actions.

Today is known in our liturgy as Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance, as well as Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. On the High Holy Days, the themes of remembrance,

justice and choices converge, as we contemplate our fate before the Throne of Justice,
and we affirm that God remembers our deeds. May we use these ten days well.

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