

## Are You Prepared for the Most Important Days of the Year?

A few weeks before the High Holidays a member of our congregation, Jeri Rogin gave me a book to read called, "This is Real and You are completely Unprepared." Based on the title you might think it was a manual written after the election by the transition team for a newly elected president. But it was written in 2003 by Rabbi Alan Lew and has nothing to do with politics or beginning a new job. The subtitle gives away the subject: "The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation."

Rabbi Lew's discourse expands on a theme I have commented on previously and always felt: that these ten days are a tremendous gift. They are an opportunity.

Think of it as if we are about to embark on a journey together. Although we are travelling together on the same ship, the outcome and the impact it will have will be unique for each of us. Each of us will have a different experience and although it will end at the same time, we will all conclude the voyage at different destinations.

The voyage began a few weeks ago, with the holiday of Tisha B'Av, the summer holiday which mourns the loss of Jewish autonomy and the destruction of the Temple. In other words, it begins with brokenness, with a reminder of the fragility of life and the ephemeral nature of that which seems to be permanent and strong. What could have been more durable, invincible and everlasting than the Beit Mikdash, the dwelling place of the *Shekinah*, God's eternal presence. Marking the day that the place that once was and still is the focus of our prayers was shattered and destroyed 2,000 years ago is what allows us to begin the process of opening our souls to the work of repair and rebuilding, which is a crucial message of the *Yamim HaNoraim*, these ten Days of Awe.

Not everyone began the journey seven weeks ago. Each of us got on at different starting points. Some began a month ago when on the first of Elul they began to hear the call of the shofar in the morning services. Others joined this past Saturday night, with the introduction of the Selihot prayers. Some got on board tonight, and others will join us tomorrow. Some may wait until Yom Kippur to embark.

And of course, unfortunately, there are those who will be too busy, distracted or preoccupied with the pursuit of other things to realize the importance of taking this journey. They think taking off of work and setting aside this time is for others, not them. That it is a throwback to a different time, something their parents or grandparents did, but not them. Or conversely, something they do not do because their parents did not. They assume that they don't need it or do not see the point of coming to the synagogue to hear prayers they do not understand. They may not wish to admit that they feel inadequate or uncomfortable because they are unfamiliar with the liturgy. Feeling intimidated and overwhelmed by something foreign to them, they avoid encounters with the unknown.

But in reality – more often than not, these are the ones who most need to join the ship about to set sail on our annual excursion.

With the passage of minutes, which quickly become hours, which roll into days, and before we realize it, become weeks and then months, suddenly we notice it is years that have passed all too quickly. We get caught up in the routine and busyness of our lives without pausing to contemplate the most important questions. Without pausing to reflect on the nature of our existence, on the quality of our relationships and life's purpose, we wonder – Where has the time gone? How did the years fly by so quickly?

Rabbi Lew writes, “Perhaps God created this pageant of judgment and choice, of transformation, of life and death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and the Book of Death, teshuvah and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture. It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case. Weeks, months and years are also inventions of human culture. Time and biology are inventions of human culture. But they are all matters of life and death, all real and all inescapable. Even though we invented the idea of weeks, we die when our allotted number of weeks has gone by. So if this event is merely the product of human culture, it is the product of an exceedingly rich culture, one that has been accumulating focus and force for three thousand years.”

God may or may not have created the world and the choices we make. Lew writes, “It makes no difference...it is inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us, as is the possibility of transformation.”

When our cars run out of gas we fill them up. When our cell phones wind down, we recharge the batteries. We sleep at night to restore our bodies. But what about our souls? How do we care for and renew them?

The Torah tells us that on the seventh day, *shavat yanifash*, that God stopped and did nothing. He rested *vayinafash*, which literally means, “He restored his soul”. By resting on the seventh day God was setting an example that we need to set aside time to restore our souls. For those who may not be able to observe the weekly sabbath, the gift of Rosh Hashana is a time to devote to renewal of our soul and spirit.

Since today is the day the world was created, *Yom HaRat HaOlam*, the day the world was born, this is a time when we are open to new beginnings. Only the foolish skeptic gets mired and caught up in ridiculing this concept by taking it literally. Those of us who embrace modernity, science and faith recognize that religion encourages introspection, and that this leads to progress. The power of this day and of this evening, of this ten day journey is that it calls upon us to look inward and to evaluate our life. It summons us to do a *din veheshbon*, an accounting of the soul, which allows us to reimagine our lives and to thereby be open to the possibility of change and transformation.

The journey culminates with our arrival at the port known as Yom Kippur, which begins with Kol Nidre when we invalidate past and future vows, thereby stripping away our masks. Our sages tell us that Yom Kippur can be understood as “*yom kmoh Purim: a day like Purim.*” Whereas on Purim we put on masks, on Yom Kippur we do the opposite. We take them off. Fasting and doing this exposes us to the raw power of coming face to face with ourselves and our shortcomings. It is as if the Kol Nidre prayer along with the *vidui*, the confession recited multiple times throughout the day calls upon us to let go of our words so we can have a fresh start. Letting go of the past prods us to embrace the promise of the future and its infinite possibilities.

The drama and choreography of these days help us confront the certainty of our mortality and thereby reflect upon what is our essence. The prayers we recite in synagogue during the days of Awe lead us to pause so we evaluate our routines and to ask ourselves difficult probing questions. Let us ask – what changes do we need to make? What about us do we want to live on? What will we take with us to the next world, the *olam haba*, the next stage?

My colleague Rabbi Rachel Ain commented that when you add money to a subway card in the New York transit system you are asked if you want to add time or value to your card?

As we gather tonight to welcome the new year of 5788, we welcome you aboard the journey of the first day of the rest of your life. May you make the most of the journey of the contemplative time we spend together during these Days of Awe. And may your prayers and worthy wishes to add value to the time of your journey in this world be fulfilled.

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