

Pre-Rosh Hashanah Thoughts

This Saturday night the High Holiday services begin with reciting Selichot, the penitential prayers. Traditionally it starts at midnight or later but for practical purposes we start at 10:00pm. Unbeknownst to some, reciting the prayers is merely a means to an end; it is primarily setting the mood to enable contemplation of the upcoming season. During the next few weeks we grapple with some difficult issues. We internalize who we are and where we are going; what are our goals and aspirations and have we succeeded in meeting or exceeding those ambitions. In Hebrew it is called '*cheshbon hanefesh*' or an accounting of our soul; a time of reflection and introspection.

In reality what is important for an individual is perhaps more important for a community. Thus, the gist of this article will be to make a communal accounting of the shul's inner soul by articulating who we are as a shul and where we are going. The sign in front our shul states that we are a 'Modern Orthodox Congregation.' I am often asked to define this description and I respond by explaining that being 'modern' is not indicative of being lax in observance nor does it modify the word orthodox. Rather, it is an expression of confidence that Judaism in the 21st century is still relevant and meaningful. We may practice Judaism according to Orthodox practices but we approach humanity with a lens of modernity. Modernity refers to our philosophy of inclusion. We respect all Jews regardless of their religious affiliation and observance. If perchance some may take offense with my inclusiveness, I maintain that modernity has its basis in our tradition. Our Patriarch Abraham argued with God and asked him to save the cities of S'dom and Amarah. He realized there were no monotheists as religious as he was, but he nevertheless went out on limb to confront Hashem.

Anshei Emuna aims to make Judaism more relevant for the 'Jew in the pew' and not to produce religious clones. We promote a Judaism that enhances everyone's spiritual journey without curtailing their individuality with predefined parameters. We are honored to serve the spiritual needs of a community where many members are not fully observant but are comfortable having an orthodox setting as their spiritual home. We believe a synagogue must be fearless in maintaining the sanctity of the religion, but equally fearless in maintaining the sanctity of man. It is often said that it is far easier to be strict than to be lenient, but it is far more important to be lenient than to be strict.

Furthermore, we believe that it is vital for Jewish continuity to focus on our commonality rather than on our differences. We believe that Jews from all denominations sing the melodious tunes of Adon Olam and Yigdal. These songs not only signal that the services are almost over and the kiddush is about to commence, but more importantly they tell of the faith we collectively share.

This ideal of inclusion is rooted in an innovative interpretation of the commandment to destroy the memory of Amalek. The Torah states that they attacked the weak and feeble in the rear - but who exactly were those left in the rear? The Midrash explains that the weak and infirm refer to the tribe of Dan who abandoned traditional Judaism and began worshiping idols. The mainstream community disengaged from them and left them to fend for themselves. Although Amalek was guilty of a heinous crime against innocent people, the Torah commands us to never forget how

we abandoned our fellow Jew and to remember that our divisiveness gave Amalek the ability to attack with impunity.

History has the tendency to repeat itself unless we learn from our past failures. Our shul's mission is to live up to the ideals of the Torah. Our intention is to practice and observe the tenets of our faith while being cognizant and accepting of the diversity of the Jewish community. We embrace each and every Jew and endeavor to make them feel that Anshei Emuna is their home. Some may consider this too 'MODERN,' but we believe we are embracing the ancient traditions of our heritage.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Jack Engel