

Pete Townsend, a member of the rock band *The Who*, wrote the lyrics to a popular hit that asks:

Who are you? Who are you? Who, who, who, who?
I really wanna know. Who are you? Who, who, who, who?

In many ways this is the central question we are supposed to ask ourselves throughout the upcoming Days of Awe. Jewish tradition understood that a real change of attitude and behavior is not instantaneous. There is no magic to Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, and the rituals of these days do not automatically transform us.

Even the process by which our traditions urge us towards תשובה (or "repentance") indicate that turning ourselves towards a better path, much less being forgiven for our wrongs, takes time. Beginning a full seven weeks before the Jewish New Year the prophetic selections (or הפטרה) read every Shabbat focus on where we have gone astray, and how to get back on the right track. The whole month before Rosh Hashanah we read Psalm 27. The mood of the Psalm vacillates between fear and faith, cynicism and uplift. At the beginning the writer says, "Why should I be afraid, for God is with me"? Then, uncertainty appears, "I seek your face. Do not hide from me." The pendulum swings back again, with the writer admitting that even the closest of relationships – of parent and child – can be rent asunder, but then asserts confidently that God will always take me in. The Psalmist gives no simple assurance. Rather, the Psalm is the outpouring of one who has betrayed the trust of a loved one, and is now doing whatever possible to get it back. No wonder it moves from hope to despair and back again. There is no promise that doing good, seeking forgiveness and choosing life will ensure happiness. The Hebrew ends abruptly ... "Had I not the assurance of God ...", but then what? Does God promise joy, prosperity, health?

Perhaps the Psalm leaves the sentence incomplete because who we are, and thus what we will be, is not in God's hands. The Psalmist reminds us to "look to God" קוה אל ה' but, in the end, the choice is ours: חזק ויאמץ לבך "Be strong, and let your heart have courage." Inspiration and faith come from beyond. But, in the end, it is we who have to

have the honesty to ask "Who am I?", to ponder "Who do I want to be?" and to have the courage to turn our lives in the right direction.

The final Torah portion we read before Rosh Hashanah is a reminder, as we move into these days, about how to do that. Our פרשה opens with a reference to all the people standing before God: "You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer."¹

Why, first of all, the need to stand? I suggest it is connected with the approaching Days of Awe, with their message of standing up straight to face the reality of our lives. At this season, we are asked as Jews to make a true accounting of how we have acted – not to shirk responsibility, but to stand face to face before our true selves. Secondly, why the need to enumerate all these people? To remind them – and us – what the covenant with God implies. Faith is not only for a select few, but is inclusive and embracing. The idea of a God, in whose image we are made, implies that there is no one who is so different than us that they are not owed dignity.

At this holy season we are asked, "what do *you* stand for?" Put another way: "Who are you?" If your children or grandchildren were to ask you what matters the most, what you feel passionate about in this world, about what your life stands for ... how might you answer?

In recent years a new word has entered the English language – "upstander." The word is a play on being a bystander, one who sits at the sidelines, does not involved, waits for someone else to act or feels it is not his or her place to say anything. In contrast, the "upstander" is someone willing to take a stand, to be responsible and to act.

To be a bystander – apathetic, at best; indifferent, at worst – is the gateway to evil. To turn aside, to refuse to stand up, allows those who are bullies to triumph. As Elie Wiesel once said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference ... the opposite of life

¹ Deuteronomy 29:9

is not death, but indifference between life and death.”² During the Second World War most people in Europe did not send Jews to the death camps. But few stood up to defend or protect. Even during the years before the Holocaust there were plenty of wrongs committed by the Nazis to which ordinary Germans averted their eyes. The author Primo Levi wrote about this:

In spite of the varied possibilities for information, most Germans didn't know because they didn't want to know. Because, indeed, they wanted not to know . . . In Hitler's Germany a particular code was widespread: those who knew did not talk; those who did not know did not ask questions; those who did ask questions received no answers. In this way the typical German citizen won and defended his ignorance, which seemed to him sufficient justification of his adherence to Nazism. Shutting his mouth, his eyes and his ears, he built for himself the illusion of not knowing, hence not being an accomplice to the things taking place in front of his very door.³

In every generation new bullies and oppressors arise. Look at what is happening this week in the Arab world, with mobs storming the streets and murdering in the name of Islam. In our own land, some attack political candidates and intimidate their supporters with a venom that should make us tremble. In Israel there are signs of a growing intolerance, symbolized two weeks ago by racist comments spray painted on the Latrun Monastery. And the greatest threat of our generation, Iran, moves towards the ultimate weapon of destruction with seeming impunity.

How do we rise up against such a tsunami of terror and hurricane of hate? What can we do?

- First, we should not delude ourselves that so-called “little wrongs” do not matter, or that our focus should only be on the big issues. Our sages teach, “at first, sin is as thin as a spider's web, but in the end it is as thick as a massive rope.”⁴ It is easy to stop wrong when it is small, and speaking out often inspires others to act more ethically. The longer we turn aside, however, the greater wrong grows.
- Second, we must understand that the refusal to respond to wrongdoing is more than acquiescence. It is tacit support. If we are witness to a wrong, we are

² *US News & World Report* (27 October 1986)

³ *Survival and Reawakening*, 381.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkot* 52b

obligated to offer a challenge – so long as what we do does not put our life at great risk. “You shall surely rebuke your neighbor”, the Torah teaches.⁵

- Finally, let us find the faith to know that just as evil grows, so does goodness. Ervan Staub was a 6-year old who, along with his family, survived the Holocaust because of the courage of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Later in life, Staub wrote, “Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start - to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement.”⁶

In our Torah portion we are told that it was not only those of that generation who stood together. “I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day.” The covenantal responsibilities of being a Jew – to rise and be counted, to hear the voice of goodness, to stand against evil – is, therefore, a legacy for all the generations. More than that, Torah tells us exactly *when* we are supposed to act. The very first words in the *parasha* are **אתם נצבים היום כלכם** “you stand *this* day, *all* of you.”⁷ We cannot wait for someone else. We cannot put off the need to stand up for others, to stand up for our people and stand up for ourselves to tomorrow. The Day of Judgment is upon us. In truth, it always is. So ... stand up.

The very first question in the Torah is **איכה**, when God ask Adam not just where he is physically, but spiritually. It is, essentially, the question Pete Townsend asks, “Who are you? Who, who?” This is what we are asked as we enter the gates of the New Year. “Who are you?”

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, זֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים we traditionally say each morning upon arising, “Praised are You, O God, Ruler of the universe, who raises up the bowed down.” Let us remember that the time to rise up, to stand for something is right now.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ Daniel Goldman, “Is Altruism Inherited?” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, April 12, 1985.

⁷ Deuteronomy 29:9

Who are we? We are the children of those who stand. We stand against indifference. We stand for truth. We stand against intolerance. We stand for justice. Let us rise up ... and fulfill the words of the words of Isaiah: "And the bent shall be made straight." (Isaiah 40:4)

Who are you? Who, who, who, who?