

D'rash Rosh Hashanah I morning, Sept 21, 2017

By Elke Martin

Good morning, and Shana Tova!

You won't believe what happened to me just a few weeks ago!

As some of you know I live in the burbs. Sometimes that's a good thing (like at night when I can sleep with an open window and all I hear are the leaves and the birds) and sometimes it's more of a cumbersome thing (like when I'd like to just stroll down the street to a bookstore or a coffee shop and bump into someone I know).

The other day I took time as a fairly new retiree to spend downtown, walk thru a museum, meet a friend for lunch, stroll around familiar neighborhoods - and that's when it happened.

I was at Dupont Circle contemplating my next steps when I found myself eye to eye with ... the rebbe of Dupont Circle.

You all have heard about him for years from our friend Al Munzer, and frankly, I was never quite sure whether he really existed – but there he was right in front of my very eyes! An old man, now, with kind and inquisitive eyes he asked about me and what most occupied my mind these days. And off we were in a fabulous conversation.

I told him I was thinking about the d'rash for the High Holy days and how hard it was to focus on one topic only and how I wanted it to be meaningful and general but also personal and it was so easy to get lost in various directions. He smiled and asked, "how has your year been so far?"

"Well, mixed, good and bad, but mainly this is a year of many good-byes. First my dear friend Dorothy died, then we lost our good friend Jack and now my beloved Eva and I have decided to move into a retirement community. It's the right thing to do for us but it is hard to leave our home of 23 years. Every time I go into the garden I think, oh I won't have this next year. Every time I walk through our living room I wonder which artwork we'll take and what we will leave behind". Hum, the rebbe pondered. "That's a big change coming for you. Have you set an intention for the New Year? It might be helpful for the path you are about to embark on."

"Actually, I have thought about intention," I answered. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi thinks of Rosh Hashanah as the stem cells of the year. Stem cells can become anything as they grow and mature. They contain infinite potential. The same is true for the New Year. The shape it will take for us depends on what we intend to grow out of this day.

According to the Jewish mystics, the kabbalists, today the door of wisdom and insight opens for us. Tomorrow, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the door of discernment and understanding swings open, too. These are the origin points of our year; our springboard into whatever is coming next.

Well, who decides what's going to happen for you in the New Year? You do. We all do. Thinking about intention let's look at Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's 4

pillars crucial for a meaningful Jewish life, “Four ways that we can heal the world. Four ways that we can heal ourselves. Four ways that we can ensure our Jewish obligation to passionately fix this planet’s problems, four ways to heal the rifts in society.” (1)

These pillars are Justice (tzedek), Lovingkindness (chesed), Responsibility (acharayut) and Human dignity (b’tzelem elochim). How would the world be different if we chose one of these four pillars to be at the center of our lives for the coming year?

What if you made justice – Tzedakah - a focal point in the new year? We have heard the Deutoronomy quote “Just ice, justice shall you pursue”. (2) Hillel used to say, The more *tzedakah*, the more *shalom*. (3) You may want to support a young person affected by the DACA ruling. You may engage with the Jews United for Justice campaign for a living wage in DC or in Virginia, you may see the gerry mandering as an issue to work towards a more just society.

What if you made this coming year about Chesed, loving-kindness? Not so much about who is right and who is wrong and who should be first and so on but instead about including the uncomfortable, about creating compassion. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that “chesed” is usually translated as ‘kindness’ but is also means ‘love’ – not love as emotion or passion, but love expressed as deed.”(4)

And responsibility, acharayut? The root ah chehr means ‘other’ so responsibility is not just about ourselves but it has the other built in. Pirkei Avot talks about acharayut. Rabbi Tarfon understood that to mean “it is not your obligation to complete the task but neither are you free from trying”.(5) Rabbi Heschel reminds us succinctly, ““Few are

guilty, but all are responsible".⁽⁶⁾ Sometimes it seems so hard to always be the responsible one and so tempting to just lie back and let others do. But what would it feel like if we stepped up each time we saw the need?

And how about human dignity? Heschel calls it paramount. Because we are created in the image of God. Because each life is sacred. Because when one person is degraded, we all are. So we'd do well in creating a way of life that celebrates the dignity of every human being.

The rebbe of Dupont Circle said, "That's a lot to digest. I think you will find your intention. But don't forget you said you were to d'rash on Rosh Hashanah. That day, if I remember correctly, you at Bet Mishpachah read the Torah portion of Yitro. Yitro is all about the divine revelation. It's important that you set an intention for the year but don't forget about God in all this. "

Of course!

I stand corrected.

Our part is to set an intention but then God will decide. The main message in the parsha of Yitro is the blessing of Divine Revelation. Rabbi Shefa Gold says, Divine Revelation "appears when we are ready to receive the awesome truth of our connection to the Source, to each other and to all creation." ⁽⁷⁾

I lean closer to the rebbe and tell him what I have told few people. I say, "I donated a kidney once and it brought me the greatest gift ever. That may sound like a contradiction because when you give an organ it could easily feel like you give something away and you are less for it. But the opposite is true. Before the operation the recipient and I did some meditation together. That's where I found my revelation – it was suddenly so clear to me that we were all connected, all part of one big whole that giving one of my kidneys to her was but sharing, it was about redistributing so we could be in balance; it was most definitely not "giving away" anything.

That thought and the stillness that came with it was so big, so powerful that there was no room for doubt, and that feeling gave me great serenity and joy. Only over time have I come to understand how monumental a gift this has been. I can go back to that moment anytime, and often I do remind myself that I am connected to the Source and to all others. Like Rabbi Shefa says, "In the moment of revelation it will become clear that the desire that has created such turmoil within me is based on an illusion of lack; connected to all of Creation I am rich beyond measure."

The Rebbe of Dupont Circle nodded and smiled. "That's what revelation is all about. That was your Sinai". Sinai is when, according to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "God started a conversation with Israel" (8) and Rabbi Michael Chernick calls divine revelation, "a great voice that did not cease".(9)

I sometimes hear that voice during meditation. I participate in Hebrew chanting, a kind of meditation I learned from Rabbi Shefa Gold. Sometimes it is just peaceful singing but other times it brings a revelation that lasts way beyond the 2 hours of chanting. Not long ago I heard the words "gratitude will and humility will" as a response to my question, "How can I be grounded in this crazy world, and what will help me make a difference?"

Gratitude will and humility will.

"Oh man," I said, "with all that's going on every day it's easy to forget." The rebbe of Dupont Circle sadly shook his head and said with some astonishment in his voice, "You forgot again, nu? Didn't Al tell you years ago? Haven't I spoken about this? You need to practice regularly in order to remember". And so it goes. We learn and then we forget. And we can be grateful if we have an opportunity to be reminded, just like my experiences with the Hebrew chanting. I turned to the rebbe to thank him but he had already gone on his way. So, just to be sure, I am telling you one more time – gratitude will and humility will.

Rosh Hashanah is a great moment in the year for us. We each have a little more time than usual to look inside, to assess our own requirements for solitude and companionship, for meditation and quiet time or for music and dance, for known and comfortable situations and for new and untested endeavors. Let us use these days of awe, this special gift we have been given to carefully listen inside

so we may experience the great voice that does not cease,

so that we may tap into the infinite potential,

so we can hear some guiding sounds that support us in the hard work of being an active, responsible, loving and constructive participant in our community.

Let us make sure we are available to receive God's revelation and take it into our lives with gratitude and humility.

Let's make this New Year a good year! Shanah Tovah!

Footnotes:

(1) A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*

(2) Deuteronomy 16:20

(3) Pirkei Avot 2:8

(4) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* p. 45

(5) Pirkei Avot 2:6

(6) A.J.Heschel *The Prophets* p.

(7) Rabbi Shefa Gold,

(8) Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Miracles: A Young Person's Guide to Jewish Spiritual Awareness*, p.30

(9) "kol gadol ve-lo yasaf" — Deuteronomy 5:19