

Putting Ourselves in Order

A story is told of a man who sat in study before the Hasidic Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna and before Rosh Hashannah came to obtain permission to be dismissed. The Rabbi said to him, “Why are you hurrying?” The man replied to him, “I am a prayer leader and I must look into the prayer book and put my prayers in order.” The Rabbi said to him, “The prayer book is the same as it was last year. But it would be better for you to look into your deeds and put yourself in order.”

In our day to day lives we are so focused on our daily activities, it is hard to be able to take the time to look into our deeds and put ourselves in order. The reason we have the High Holy Days every year is we need to have time to get out of our regular life rhythm and have a few days to focus on personal growth. As this story illustrates, even when entering the High Holy Days, it is easy to have the rituals of the holidays become rote practice and to lose sight of the deeper meaning of these days. The purpose of Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna’s statement is to inspire us to focus our intentions to help ourselves get outside of our regular practices and figure out how to focus on what really matters.

One of the interesting aspects of this past year of Covid is that we were taken out of the rhythm of our busy day to day lives and had time to ourselves. As we get closer to what our lives were like before Covid, before we fully dive into the New Year we can ask ourselves like Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna ask, did we take the time to look into our deeds and put ourselves

in order? What did we learn about ourselves in this year when our normal lives was so interrupted?

For the Covid year, seclusion was forced upon us and many of us found that deeply challenging. In Judaism, the intentional experience of seclusion called *hitbodedut* in Hebrew is a highly regarded spiritual practice. This practice of *hitbodedut* is the observance of secluded meditation and prayer with the goal of self-actualization and communion with God. As early as Biblical times we hear about prophetic individuals like the prophet Ezekiel who would separate themselves from the community to commune with God. In more recent times, we are told of a Hasidic Rabbi, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk who withdrew into himself. He retreated to a room off the house of study of his Hasidim. He had a hole cut in the door so that he could hear them praying. And the only one he allowed to enter was his childhood friend, Tsvi Hirsh, who three times a day brought him food. While such extreme asceticism and separating oneself so much from the community is largely frowned upon, the story of the Kotzker Rebbe serves as an extreme example in order to teach that there is a deep spiritual value in intentional, meditative seclusion. The Mussar teacher Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explains further, “You can only get a feeling for your internal life when you are alone. With a half hour of being alone you can come to feel things you never knew about yourself and see what you are lacking in spirituality. You will set new goals to reach.” While our Covid seclusion was not intentional, hopefully we were able to grow in our internal life while we were secluded in our homes.

Once a person has gained mastery of the methods of spiritual seclusion, the focus turns to the goal of such spiritual practices. According to the Torah our mission is to be holy because God is holy. In order to be holy, we must follow the commandments which teach us to be ethical, compassionate beings. Since we are physical beings with an animal soul, within the

commandments is the recognition that being human means that we will not always follow the path to holiness, that we will fall short. As a result, the most important goal in Judaism is to purify and elevate the soul in order to reach the goal of being holy. According to Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein, “To fulfill Torah means to grow as a person, and to grow truly as a person is tantamount to the fulfillment of Torah.” Our life’s work should be focused on the continual refinement of our souls with the goal of inner change. The spiritual path in Judaism is not about seeking personal enlightenment as some type of far off intellectual pursuit, it is about living every day with the goal of refining yourself so that every action you engage in in life is for the purpose of holiness. The Kotzker Rebbe secluded himself from the rest of the world because he could not handle the potential of the world to corrupt his sense of being holy. For normative Judaism such extreme seclusion is not necessary, but the lesson about refining oneself in seeking the path of holiness is an important one.

The path to holiness begins with self-awareness. Each individual is created differently and so each individual has different aspects of their soul to work on. This act of self-awareness is the hardest work of all because it requires taking a hard look at your deeds and not shying away from admitting where you have failed. As the story of Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna illustrates, doing this work is also challenging because we get into life patterns that distract us from the really hard work of learning about ourselves in order to put our deeds in order. To reach the heights of spiritual purification and achieve self-actualization, Judaism has developed numerous spiritual practices including study and contemplation, prayer, meditation, and also seclusion.

In the past year and a half, we have all become experts in seclusion. Like the Kotzker Rebbe we essentially only saw people through a proverbial hole cut in the wall in the form of our

electronic devices. Our food was delivered to us in a way that kept us separated from our fellow person. During this time of enforced seclusion, were we able to put our deeds in order and grow as people? Were we able to learn about ourselves and what did we learn about ourselves that can help us reach our highest potential? Even if the enforced seclusion did not lead you to such contemplation, now that we have been through this period of enforced seclusion, we know that we can engage in this spiritual practice and use it on this New Year to look into our deeds and put ourselves in order. May you have a meaningful New Year filled with personal growth.