

RABBI RICK RHEINS

CLERGY

Meaning Beyond Absurdity



In his precious book, Forty Days of Transformation, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins assembled a profound collection of daily meditations to help guide the reader in the forty day preparation from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur. My favorite is the citation of an interview with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1972 just three weeks before he died. The reporter asked Rabbi Heschel, “What message have you for young people?”

Rabbi Heschel replied: “Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.... And above all, let them remember... to build a life as if it were a work of art” (p. 22).

It goes without saying that we are living in challenging times. For that matter, every era and every age has had its challenges . . . and its advantages. It’s also probably safe to say that, depending on who you ask, things used to be a lot worse --- or better and that “things nowadays” are so much easier --- or tougher. And who determines the greatness or the dysfunction of an era? Of a life? Well, it is each and every one of us.

In a Sufi teaching, a wise man was asked: “Who was your inspiration for finding the enlightened path?” He answered, “A dog. One day I saw a dog, almost dead with thirst, standing by a water’s edge. Every time he looked at his reflection in

the water he was frightened and withdrew, because he thought it was another dog. Finally, he was so thirsty that he cast away his fear and leaped into the water---and the ‘other’ dog vanished. Only then did the dog realize that he was the one who was keeping him from what he sought.

At that moment, I understood that I myself have placed obstacles in front of my path. And with that, it vanished!”

Our task is to find meaning beyond absurdity. And that meaning is found within us; it is the eternal connection we’ve had as a people ever since we stood at Sinai.

⁹You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God -- your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, ¹⁰ your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer --

¹¹ to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God, which Adonai your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; ¹² to the end that you are established this day as God’s people just as was promised to you and just as it was sworn to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

¹³ I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, ¹⁴ 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. (Deuteronomy 29:9-14)

Every year, we, like every generation of our people, stand at Sinai. Some are filled with trepidation. Some are filled with awe. Some are wounded with a broken spirit. Some are inspired with promise. Some are giddy with romance. Some feel oppression of loneliness. Some are wounded from anger. Some are wounded from love. Some are longing for a miracle. Some shrug at the absurdity. Brothers and sisters all. Our people. Standing once again at Sinai. And the meaning? Well, the meaning is as close as the very air we breathe:

¹¹ Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. ¹² It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” ¹⁴ No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

As we stand together and enter the New Year 5780, know that Susan, Joshua, Sam, and Jakob join me in wishing you and your loved ones God’s blessings of good health, happiness and prosperity.

L’Shanah Tovah teka-tay-vu vet’cha-tay-mu, v’ Chag Sukkot Sameiach,

Rick

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