

Getting Our Priorities Straight

In his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Sir. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth tells a story of the Second Lubavitcher Rebbe, the "Mitteler Rebbe," who was so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cry of his baby son. His father, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, heard the crying and went down and took the baby in his arms until he went back to sleep. Then he went in to his son, still intent on his books, and said, "My son, I do not know what you are studying, but it is not the study of Torah if it makes you deaf to the cry of a child." (As told to me by Rabbi Jennifer Feldman)

The "Mitteler Rebbe" got it backwards. First he should have attended to his crying child and then to the study of Torah. He had his *priorities backwards* and because of this, he missed point of Torah and Judaism entirely. Rosh Hashanah is all about learning how to get our priorities straight; discovering what demands our attention first and foremost and what can wait. We often think about Rosh Hashanah as a holiday of reflection leading to improving our relationships with others. A holiday in which teshuva is defined in terms of repentance and forgiveness. But on Rosh Hashanah we also say: Hayom Harat Olam, Today is the birthday of the world. Today is the day when we

celebrate God's creation. And what was God's creation all about? Bringing order to the world.

If we look back at the creation narrative in Genesis we see that Creation Story is all about making order out of chaos. The second verse in the Torah tells us that the earth was *Tohu Va Vohu*, literally a land of "desert waste" and goes on to explain the way that God ordered and organized the world out of that Chaos. In that sense Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of order out of chaos and reminds us that as we attempt to create our own lives anew, one of our primary responsibilities is striving to ensure that our priorities are in order. Are we living our lives in accordance with our values and our beliefs? How have our priorities changed over the past year and how have they stayed the same? This is how we examine our purpose in life. This is how we understand the meaning of our own creation. These are the types of questions that Rosh Hashanah invites us to explore.

But we cannot answer these types of questions unless we first have a healthy understanding of ourselves, and of where we are in our lives.

Abraham Joshua Heschel told the following story:

There was a school boy who was forgetful. He was always losing things. So he worked out a system. Before he went to sleep at night he made out a list of all the things he would need the next day. He wrote: My suit is on the chair. My hat is in the closet. My books are on the desk. My shoes are under the chair. And I am in the bed.

He woke up the next morning and started to collect his things. They were all in the right places. The suit was on the chair. The books were on the desk. The shoes were under the chair. Then he came to the last item on his list. He went to look for himself in the bed but the search was in vain. He wasn't there.

Where am I?" he asked. (Rabbi Jack Riemer, World of the High Holidays)

Where are you? This is actually the first question that is asked in the Torah. After the creation of the world, when God is looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God calls out to Adam: "Ayeka?" Where are you? **Where are you?** That is the first question of the creation story and the first question that we are to ask ourselves as we begin the work of self-renewal and re-creation each year. We engage in teshuvah, literally "turning"—turning inwards as we attempt to get a glimpse of our true selves, and then turning outwards to get a glimpse at how we are living our lives.

Understanding who we are and where we are in life is no small task, especially in this day and age. Rabbi Hayim Herring writes that the twenty

first century has brought with it a renewed sense of urgency over questions of meaning in our lives. This is particularly true given the economic challenges that our country has faced over the past few years which have forced us to reconsider and reevaluate many areas of our lives. It is these types of questions that we must grapple with as we seek to understand who we are and who we would like to become- questions such as:

- If I live in an age when I can get whatever I want, how do I decide what is ultimately important?
- If I can choose to be a part of any community, which one is more desirable for me to join?
- If I live in a world that is always “on,” how can I ensure that I do not lose my soul?
- If I live in a world where I can keep taking, do I have a responsibility to give something back?

So now this brings us back to the natural outgrowth of understanding who we are, and where we are in life: the evaluation of our priorities. In his book, First Things First, Steven Covey shares the following story:

There was an expert on time management who was speaking to a group of busy executives at a seminar. To make his point, he used an illustration. He took out a one-gallon wide-mouthed jar and put it on the table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and placed them carefully, one at a time, in the jar. When the jar was full to the top and no more rocks could fit inside, he asked: “Is this jar full?” Everyone in the class said: “Yes.” He said: “Really?” Then he reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some of the gravel in and shook the jar, so that the pieces of gravel worked themselves down into the crevices between the rocks. Then he asked the group again, “Is the jar full?” By this time, the class

was onto him, so they said, "Probably not." "Good!" he replied. And then he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started putting the sand in and it quickly went into all the spaces that were left between the rocks. Then once more, he asked the question, "Is the jar full?" "No!" the students said. Again he said: "Good." This time, he took a pitcher of water and began to pour it into the jar until the jar was full to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked: "What do you think is the point of all this?" One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is to teach us that no matter how full your schedule is, you can always fit something more in if you want to." The speaker said, "No, that's not the point at all. The truth that this illustration is meant to teach us is that if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all." (*What Are The Big Rocks in Your Jar?*)

Ask yourself: What are the big rocks in your life? What are the things that you really want to accomplish? Is it spending more time with your family? Is it finding more time to take on that hobby or project that you have been talking about for years? Is it making more time for yourself? Is it changing your work habits? Is it spending more time with your synagogue community? Is it working for a cause that you really believe in? These big rocks are frequently the things that require the most time, the most focus, the most care. Whatever it is, these questions about our values and our priorities remind us that if we forget to put in our big rocks first, we will never get them in at all.

Questions about priorities are not new to Judaism, they were not created in the twenty first century, nor were they meant to exist solely in times of economic crisis. These types of questions have been around for thousands of years. They are the questions of Rosh Hashanah— the questions necessary to celebrating the creation of the world, and exploring the creation of ourselves.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in re-discovering our identity, our values, and our priorities lies in the fact that the answers to these questions are meant to stay with us throughout the year.

Rabbi Menahem Mendle of Kotzk once put this question to his students: What was the hardest part of the *Akedah* for Abraham? Was it the initial call, the long walk to Moriah, or the binding? His answer: the hardest part was coming down the mountain.

Rabbi David Wolpe comments: the hardest part of the High Holiday experience comes: *...two months later, when we are supposed to live by the promises we made.* And reminds us that: *We should treasure the summit of inspiration, but not live by it. Here below, once we have come down the mountain, our task awaits* (Rabbi David Wolpe, Elkins, RH Readings).

On Rosh Hashanah we must ask ourselves whether or not we are living out our deepest held convictions and values. We must explore whether or not our priorities are in the proper order. That is how we celebrate the creation of God's world, by getting in touch with the parts of ourselves that are made *betzelem elohim*, in God's image. *And then, once Rosh Hashanah is over and we have come down the mountain*, we must continually work to ensure that we are living up to our self discovery, always remembering that the work of creating our own selves is a life-long endeavor.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah, May this be a good and sweet New Year for all of us and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.