

Look Into Yourself

Rosh Hashanah 2001/5772

Rabbi Barry Marks

I have many times over the years made reference in my High Holiday preaching to the story of the rabbi and his student that appears in Shai Agnon's anthology, *Days of Awe*. "Rabbi", the student asked, as the summer was drawing to a close, "I need to take a break from my studies for the next several weeks. I have been hired to serve as cantor for a congregation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I need some time to look into the holiday prayer book and familiarize myself with the prayers I must make sure I know the prayers in their proper order." "The prayer book," the rabbi replied, "is the same as it was last year. Better that you spend your time looking into yourself and putting yourself in order."

The rabbi in the story is reiterating one of the major themes that our religious tradition associates with this season – our need to engage during the Days of Awe in a *cheshbon hanefesh*, a spiritual accounting or taking stock. Just as a shopkeeper will want to take an inventory periodically to learn which items are in stock and which need to be re-ordered, what is popular with the store's customers and what stays on the shelf, neglected and unsought, so the individual will benefit from assessing his or her own strengths and weaknesses, accomplishments and failures and from identifying traits and behaviors, patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that need to be changed, adjusted or channeled in a more positive direction.

Rosh Hashanah is known as *yom ha-din*, the Day of Judgment. In classical Jewish theology God sits in judgment over us today, recording our destiny for the coming year on the basis of our merits. We gather in prayer, because we are well aware of our flaws and imperfections. We fall short of what God and Torah demand. We stray from the ideals we profess to believe and live by. That is an inevitable fact of the human condition. And so we plead in our worship that the judgment that is issued this day and sealed on Yom Kippur be tempered with *rachamim*, God's **compassionate** acceptance of our frailty, forgiveness of our shortcomings, and recognition of our sincere desire to repent.

Since we are not prophets, God does not communicate Divine judgment to us audibly and in verbal statements, “Barry, you goofed up last year, you fell short, your sins outweigh your merits, and regretfully I must chastise and punish you during the year to come.” Nor (as most of us come to realize by our teen years, if not before) are illness and adversity or whatever other modes of suffering life randomly inflicts on us a reflection of God’s judgment, despite what a literal reading of some of our sacred texts might lead us to believe. And so we are left to hope that our own personal self-accounting might be the means by which God will speak to us, that when we endeavor to take stock of ourselves in an honest, candid and unbiased fashion we might come closer to seeing ourselves as God sees us. A totally objective and in-depth perspective on ourselves may be well-nigh impossible (we are, after all, not God and not exactly disinterested parties), but the more earnestly we strive, the closer we will come.

“Rather than looking into the prayer book, look into yourself.” The gray-covered Rabbinical Assembly Machzor is the same as it was when we first adopted it many years ago and not all that different from the black-bound Silverman prayer book that was its predecessor. And after forty-plus years of conducting holiday services, the words of the prayers and the melodies to which they’re sung are quite familiar to me. I know they are to most of you, as well. And there’s comfort in that. But how familiar am I with my self? Out of embarrassment or unwillingness to confront uncomfortable truths about myself, I may shy away from an honest look in the mirror. I may be quite comfortable with my accustomed self-image, but how closely does it comport with reality?

I am one of those people who are perpetually making resolutions, particularly at Rosh Hashanah, but I have to share with you how disconcerting I find it that each year the list of resolutions I’ve drafted is virtually identical list to what I drew up the year before; it is the same perceived shortcomings that I’m striving to overcome. I deserve an A for consistency, but I would have hoped to have made some progress over the years in my efforts at self-improvement rather than having to return to the same old issues, to re-plow the same ground each year.

I believe many of you experience the same thing – the difficulty of change and the persistence of traits and habits you would prefer to have been rid of long ago. The rabbi in our story, however, seems to imply that there **are** changes within ourselves, subtle and

imperceptible though they may be, that make this year's self-accounting different from last year's and render it a necessary exercise for spiritual growth. The prayer book remains the same, but we are altered by the passage of time and by new and different circumstances. Life does not stand still. I may feel that I'm dealing with the same failings, but perhaps there has been some improvement, imperceptible to me but nonetheless real. Perhaps, on the other hand, there are weaknesses and shortcomings I didn't think about in previous years and which I need to be aware of. Maybe this year I will have a greater capacity for insight into myself and will be able to summon up a greater measure of strength and inner resolve to make changes. We recite the same words of prayer from year to year and sing many of the same melodies, but the content of and, more importantly, the possibilities engendered by this year's *cheshbon ha-nefesh* will be different.

Leading the congregation in prayer or performing any activity in public that requires the mastery of a set of skills can be frightening. We fear being embarrassed in front of our peers, which is why we feel the need to practice, to go through the motions until they become familiar and routine. Our spiritual self-accounting is done in the privacy of our communion with God, but it too requires self-discipline and effort and familiarity with the subject. A performer seeks to inspire and to entertain. The leader of a prayer service aims to impart a sense of closeness to and intimacy with God. In taking stock of ourselves spiritually, our objectives must be, first of all, honesty with ourselves and, secondly, achieving the motivation to carry out necessary and desirable personal change. The biggest obstacle is our boundless capacity to rationalize, to find ingenious excuses for ourselves, for our omissions and our offenses. Dr. Heschel reminded us that a truly pious person is one who goes beyond the letter of the law. So while the Torah commands us not to deceive others, true piety goes further and demands that we refrain from self-deception as well.

What we see when we look inward will differ for each of us. Embarrassment and shame preclude me from revealing too many details of my own personal self-inventory. I would hope that there were not too many instances when I acted with malice or hurt others intentionally in my own quest for gratification, but there were doubtless some, and I need to acknowledge them. Far more numerous were the times I acted, not maliciously,

but thoughtlessly and without consideration of the consequences for myself and for others, or when I spoke the first words that came to mind without weighing how they might be misinterpreted or whether or not they might come across as hurtful.

There have been other times when I failed to be sufficiently appreciative of the graciousness and generosity of others and took their friendship and kindness for granted, times too when I allowed good intentions to fall by the wayside and didn't communicate to others, as I meant to, my concerns for their needs and their well-being. Being attentive to the task at hand or to the person with whom one is speaking is the mark of a thoughtful individual. I recognize the importance of attentiveness and strive for it, but like many of us I often find myself "multi-tasking", which, at least for me, diminishes my capacity to work effectively and to be truly present to others. The rabbi in my story admonished his student to put himself in order. With all of the tasks and responsibilities of daily living, I am sometimes unsure if I am truly "in order", that is to say that I have a sense of where my priorities should lie and act accordingly. I have wasted opportunities and have not always made the best use of either the time or the gifts that God has given me. And finally, although I am a religious leader, I have to admit that my service of God (through Torah study, prayer, and concern for God's creatures and God's creation) could have been more fervent and more consistent. No, I have not murdered or robbed or borne false witness; and yes, all of us live stressful and busy lives, which may explain some of the offenses and omissions I've mentioned. But I do have the potential to do and to be so much better – not perfect, mind you, but better.

Recognize yourself in any of what I've said? Perhaps, you do, because while the details may vary, the general outlines probably apply to most of us. I spoke of embarrassment and shame, but it is not our shortcomings and imperfections for which we should feel embarrassed but rather our failure to address them and learn from our missteps. The prayer book remains by and large the same – words on a page that have been handed down to us over the generations, but we, being alive, can and must grow.

Acknowledging what needs to be changed and the areas where there is room to grow is the first step. But change and growth are difficult, far more so than I used to think in my youthful naivete. Feelings of guilt can be one of the prime obstacles. Such feelings **are** useful and productive when they motivate us to make amends for past

wrongs and to change our ways. But they can just as easily become a pit in which we wallow, so fixated on beating ourselves up that we become incapable of acting. Perfectionism is yet another pitfall; the perfect, it has been said, is the enemy of the good. If I can't be perfect (and none of us, being human, can), why bother (so I am tempted to think), why bother expending the effort to be a little or even a lot better?

The greatest peril, however, as the Chasidic masters understood, is despair. Martin Buber in his *Way of Man according to the Teachings of Hasidism* tells of the first Chabad rabbi, Shneur Zalman of Ladi, who interpreted God's question to Adam in the Garden of Eden, *ayeka*, "where are you?", as a query directed not just to the first human being but to all of Adam's descendants as well. God, said the rabbi, is saying to each individual, "you have lived so many years" and asking us, "where along life's path are you?" This too refers to self-accounting, taking stock, but the process is initiated by God, and the focus is a more comprehensive one, involving not so much actions and behaviors as the meaning and significance of the individual's life. Buber goes on to note that there is a danger that the individual might hear God's question and repeat it to himself in a spirit of despair, understanding it to imply that "from the place where you are now, there is no exit", no way of gaining access to a life of meaning and purpose.

Let us not succumb to the despair or hopelessness that can taint the whole undertaking of looking into ourselves. Rosh Hashanah with its ringing proclamation that "prayer, repentance and charity avert the evil decree" has always struck me as a time of optimism. Hopefulness is appropriate for us, as we begin a new year. We can become as familiar with our own merits and shortcoming as we are with the texts we have been reciting for years and decades. Despite the challenges we will encounter, we can change, we can put our lives in order, we can influence our own destiny in the year ahead for the better.