Lose the Rat Race: Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Dr. Bruno Bettelheim wrote that "today's popular conviction is that life is a rat race." People have become so engrossed in the battles to get ahead materially in this world, that they tend to put aside the claims of the soul.

As we compete in the rat race, we may not even realize how thoroughly we have abandoned our inner freedom, our quest for ultimate meaning. We want to win the rat race even if it means compromising or abandoning the values that imbue life with genuine meaning.

Some people wake up one day and ask: why am I doing this? What is my life all about? How can I get out of this rat race? They respond by trying to reorganize their lives and reclaim their autonomy. Others may go through life without responding to these questions, ignoring them, suppressing them. They are so busy competing and trying to outdo everyone else that they do not allow themselves the luxury of thinking too deeply about the meaning of life.

We cannot genuinely "win" at life unless we "lose" the rat race. A life well lived is characterized by calm wisdom, a transcendental sense of life's meaning, and an ability to love, empathize with and help others. It does not view life as an eternal and meaningless battle to get "ahead."

People in the rat race usually are not evil or corrupt, although some are. Many are simply drawn into the race because they have not thoroughly thought through their philosophy of life or do not have the independence of spirit to stand up for their values and ideals. They are driven by conformism or quasi-totalitarianism. They surrender their freedom and autonomy in order to play the game of life according to the rules of the rat race.

As we enter the days of Shabbat Teshuba and Yom Kippur, we will have ample time to re-evaluate our lives. The season of repentance offers us a new opportunity to review our past, and re-direct our futures. Life doesn't have to be--and should not be--a rat race. We each have the power and responsibility to assert our freedom and autonomy, to consider our souls as well as our bodies. May the forthcoming holy days be a time of spiritual growth and purification.

***This column is drawn from the book, "Losing the Rat Race, Winning at Life", by Rabbi Marc D. Angel. The book may be ordered through the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please send your request to info@jewishideas.org

Angel for Shabbat