Standing Before the Almighty: Thoughts on Parashat Nitsavim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Nitsavim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"You are all standing today before the Lord your God..." (Devarim 29:9)

Moses reminds the entire people of Israel that they are each standing before God. Whether one is the head of a tribe or a water-carrier, all are ultimately judged by God. Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh, the great 16th century mystic and commentator, notes that we humans do not know how to evaluate each other properly--this is only known by God. There are people who may seem important to us--but who are deficient in the eyes of God. There are people who may seem insignificant to us--but who are highly regarded by the Almighty.

Not only may we be deceived in our evaluation of others, we also may be deceived in our evaluation of our own selves. We may either over exaggerate our virtues or underestimate our good qualities. If we remind ourselves that we are standing before God, we can hope to come to a truer understanding of ourselves and others.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, offered a poignant insight into the season of holy days we are about to observe. A dominant symbol of Rosh HaShana is the Shofar. The law is that a Shofar must be bent. The moral lesson is that we, too, should bow ourselves in penitence and contrition. We come before the Almighty, humbly asking forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings. Indeed, the theme of the period between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur is repentance.

Shortly after Yom Kippur, we observe the Festival of Succoth. A dominant symbol of that holiday is the Lulav. According to halakha, a Lulav must have a straight spine--if it is bent over, then it is not valid for the performance of the mitzvah. The Lulav reminds us that we must stand tall, that there are times when contrition and meekness are not appropriate. We must conduct ourselves with principled commitment to our ideas and ideals, being straight and upright in our words and

deeds.

Rabbi Halevy notes that we each need to learn from the Shofar and the Lulav. We need the humility symbolized by the Shofar, and the strength symbolized by the Lulav. We need to balance these qualities to reach a realistic and proper approach to life.

As we enter the holy day season, it is important for us to remember that we each stand before the Almighty, who Alone knows the essence of who we are. The ultimate Arbiter of the value of our lives is the One to whom we are answerable. There is no point in pretending to be what we aren't, or in posturing to make ourselves more important in the eyes of others--God always knows the Truth about who we are.

So let us come before the Almighty with honesty and humility, bent over like the Shofar. Let us note our errors and weaknesses, and let us resolve to do better with our lives. But let us also come before the Almighty as a Lulav--upright and straight, strong in our commitment to the teachings of Torah. Let us neither over-estimate--nor under-estimate--who we are, and what our lives mean.

***The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals wishes our members and friends a happy and healthy New Year--and many years to come. Tizku leShanim Rabbot.

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