Exile and Redemption: Thoughts for Shabbat, August 21, 2010

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Life is filled with choices. We have all made fateful decisions which have determined our road of life. We chose a school to attend, a career, a spouse, a lifestyle, friends, a level of religious observance. Indeed, everything we are today is the result of the many choices we have made throughout the course of our lives.

We may look back at our various decisions and ask: were they right or wrong? Should I have done this or that? Am I living my true life, or have I actually taken the wrong path, a path not true to myself, to who I really am?

All of us live our lives, but we are also trailed by "shadow lives", lives that we might have led based on choices we might have made. Sometimes, a shadow life might be truer to our essence than the life we are actually living.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, put a new light on the concepts of "galut" (exile) and "geulah" (redemption). Generally, these terms refer to the Jewish people as a whole. But Rabbi Soloveitchik applied these concepts also to the individual. Each person experiences galut, exile. We are spread out in many directions, influenced by many pressures, pulled, tugged and shoved. We are not always able to do what we want to do, or what we think is right to do.

"Exile means lacking a home, and one who sins is a person without a home." A person in spiritual exile senses a loss of direction, focus and purpose in life. He/she is plagued, at least sometimes, by a feeling of malaise, of having steered off the true course. Is this really who I am and who I wanted to be? Is this the life that I had wanted for myself? If I could start over again, would I make some different choices, choices truer to what is good and what is right?

Geulah, redemption, is a process of reuniting oneself with God, unifying oneself, finding the way home. Redemption comes about only after deep and careful reflection. We need the critical ability to separate what is from what might have been; who I am from who I should be, or might be, or could be. Geulah means finding our way back to the roots of our personhood, and at the same time to the

roots of our Jewishness.

During the summer months, we experienced "the three weeks" between the fast days of 17 Tamuz and 9 Ab. This was a period of national mourning as we recalled the exiles of our people following the destruction of our First and Second Temples in ancient Jerusalem. We are now in the midst of the "seven weeks of consolation", when our weekly prophetic readings focus on redemption, on the better times that lay ahead for the Jewish people. While our attention is on the exile and redemption of our people, we need also to think about the exile and redemption of ourselves as individuals.

This is the season to submit ourselves to a review of our spiritual gains and losses, our achievements and failures. It is a time to examine our lives and our shadow lives, to re-evaluate past decisions, to set ourselves on a course of life that moves us from exile to redemption. It is a time to return to our essential selves, to our Torah and traditions. It is a time to shake off the external pressures, and focus on what is right, true and important to us as Jews and as human beings.

It is a time to come home.

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Angel for Shabbat