Searching for Ultimate Clarity: Thoughts for the High Holy Day Season

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Thoughts for the High Holy Day Season

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Talmud (Pesahim 50a) tells a remarkable story. The great sage, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, had a promising and learned son who took ill—and died. The grief at the loss of this young man was immeasurable. But then, amazingly, the son somehow revived. And the joy at his coming back to life was no doubt even greater than the grief at his supposed death.

Rabbi Yehoshua realized that his son had undergone a unique experience, having tasted death but then having been returned to life. So the father asked the son: what did you see on the other side? What is the nature of the world after death? The son responded: “olam hafukh ra-iti,” I saw a topsy-turvy world. Those who are great here are small there; and those who are small here are great there. Rabbi Yehoshua told his son: “olam barur ra-ita,” you saw a clear world; you saw things the way they really are.

In this world, we cannot easily judge who is actually great or insignificant. We live in a world of illusions and shadows, and we are easily deceived. How can we know the real essence of anyone, if they are truly great or not, if they are truly good or not? How can we see things here as they ultimately are in the eyes of God? Only in the next world, the world of spirit and truth, does clarity prevail. In this world, not only are we not able to clearly understand others, but we often have difficulty even evaluating our own true selves.

But how can we attain clarity of insight? How can we see things with the lucidity of genuine truth? Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has found that when people reach the last stage of life, when they have accepted their impending death, they often become infused with remarkable clarity. There is no more reason for deception; one has nothing to lose by being totally honest. At this last stage of life, a person can give a clear evaluation of his or her life.

In his studies of individuals who underwent near-death experiences, Prof. Raymond Moody has found common elements in the experiences of all his subjects, regardless of their gender, race, or religion. Having “gone to the other side” and returned, they all tended to reach two conclusions: one must love others; one must learn as much as possible. This extreme experience jarred them into a world of spiritual clarity; they somehow learned to focus on what is truly important in life, on what has ultimate value for our souls.

But all of us want to gain clarity of insight without having to wait until the very end of our lives! Very few of us will undergo a near-death experience. So how are we to gain this insight here and now?

It seems to me that the High Holy Day Season plays a special role in this regard. It attempts to place us, albeit symbolically, into a crisis mode. The imagery of these days is that we are, in fact, on trial for our lives. We come before God and plead with Him to inscribe us in the Book of Life. Yet, we know fully that He may decide otherwise.

Each of us experiences this season differently, because each of us is a different person. We respond to the prayers and the rituals to the degree that we bring our knowledge, feelings and sensitivity to them. If we spend Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in serious contemplation and prayer, we can gain much. Each of us has the opportunity to enter the mood and spirit of these days.

Rabbinic tradition speaks of “teshuvah sheleimah,” a complete repentance. This entails not merely repenting for this sin or that sin, or asking forgiveness for this transgression or that error. Complete repentance means transforming our personalities, transforming the way we lead our lives, seeing our lives organically, comprehensively, clearly.

This is the challenge of the High Holy Days—to judge ourselves truly. Through this exercise of prayer and meditation, we may gain the spiritual insight which leads us to a dynamic self-transformation.

We should be moving ahead, raising our lives to a higher level. May we merit to see “olam barur”—a clear world, a true world. And with this clarity, may we have the merit to make our lives and our world a better, more spiritual, wiser place for all of us.

Angel for Shabbat