Separation and Reunion: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana and Shabbat Teshuva

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The root of deepest human sadness is embodied in the word "separation." We feel this sadness especially at moments of transition: when we say goodbye to a child who is leaving for college or moving out of town; when we say goodbye to a loved one whom we won't be seeing for a long time. Parents cry at the weddings of their children. Their tears, to be sure, are tears of happiness; yet, they are also tears of pathos, of separation.

There is the poignant separation of divorce, of breaking off close relationships; and the ultimate separation of death. Saying goodbye to a dying parent, spouse, relative or friend must be counted among the saddest of human experiences.

It is at moments of separation that we feel our emotions surging in uncontrollable waves. We are at our best and at our worst. We come to recognize that we are not in control of everything, that we cannot hold things still, freeze time, freeze relationships. We cannot prevent death.

"Reunion" and reconciliation are at the root of the deepest human joy and satisfaction. Seeing a loved one after years of separation, reuniting with family and friends--these experiences bring tears of happiness. We feel the completeness of our lives. Things are now right. The joys of reunion are implied by our belief in an afterlife where we will ultimately be reunited with loved ones who have passed on. Death, in other words, is not a final separation. It, too, will be followed eventually by reunion.

Separation and reunion seem like opposites. They are not. They are two sides of one coin, two harmonious notes in the rhythm of life. One without the other is impossible, just as it is impossible for there always to be light and no darkness, always sunshine and no rain.

The three themes in the Musaf of Rosh Hashanah may be considered in light of the themes of separation and reunion. The first section describes God as King, the Being that has control over life and death. When we contemplate this image of

God, we react with fear, with a sense of separation. We realize that we are not ultimately in control of our lives--God is. We feel awed by God's power, we feel separated, even alienated.

The next theme, though, is "zikhronot"--God remembers. He acts with kindness. God is a compassionate Parent who is concerned with our lives. We are not forgotten or forsaken. Our lives are not random or anonymous. We are remembered, we are brought closer to God and to each other.

The third theme, "shofarot", serves as a bridge between the poles of separation and reunion. The shofar reminds us of the akedah story, a symbol of separation, where a father was to sacrifice his beloved son. Abraham, alone with Isaac on a forsaken mountain, realizes that God is the ultimate king with control over life and death.

But the shofar is also reminiscent of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. At that time, the Israelites were crowded together, united, touching shoulders. There was reconciliation between the people and God.

Rosh Hashana reminds us of the root of our greatest sadness and our greatest happiness. Memories of past separations come to mind, memories that will never leave us and that we experience intensely. But we also experience reunion. We are together in the synagogue. Members of our family have returned; friends and neighbors have come together. We are glad.

Separation is an inevitable part of life. The family and the community help us deal with these separations as best we can. A synagogue provides us the opportunity to pray and to study together, to increase our happiness, to enable us to participate in acts of kindness, caring and sharing.

We seldom have the power to prevent separation and the anguish that goes with it. But we do have the possibility of increasing our sense of completeness by uniting with our family, loved ones, friends; by sharing, encouraging, by being part of the life of our community. Separation and sadness often come of themselves. Reunion and reconciliation require us to take the initiative.

It is the beginning of a New Year. The rhythm of life and death continues, the rhythm of separation and reunion. Let us be strong in facing the challenges and losses that confront us. Let us gain strength from reuniting with family and friends--and with God.

Angel for Shabbat