Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth and Simhat Torah

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

On August 21, 1911, Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," one of the world's most famous paintings, was stolen right off the wall of the Louvre museum in Paris. The crime wasn't discovered until the next day. The Louvre was closed for a week due to the police investigation.

When the Louvre was re-opened, a line of people visited the museum to stare solemnly at the empty space on the wall where the "Mona Lisa" had once hung. One visitor left a bouquet of flowers. Indeed, until the painting was ultimately returned to the Louvre on December 30, 1913, throngs of visitors came to the museum to gaze at the blank wall! More people seem to have come to see the blank wall than had come in the previous two years to see the actual painting. What motivated so many visitors to come to see the blank wall?

Perhaps it was sadness at the loss of a great art treasure.

Perhaps it was due to regret. Why hadn't we come to see it more often while it was hanging? Why was security at the museum so lax?

Perhaps it was concern for the future. Will the "Mona Lisa" ever be found and returned?

Whatever the motivation, thousands of people came to the Louvre to stare at an empty space.

I think this episode can be understood as a parable of life.
Our lives are a collection of pieces of art—our family, friends, experiences, careers, successes.

We come to a blank wall: failures, losses.

We are struck with sadness. We have lost possibilities, opportunities, relationships.

We are struck with regret. We could have and should have done better with our lives.

We are concerned for the future. Can we restore our losses, or can we at least learn to live with our losses and failures?

We have come to the closing days of our holy day period. Rosh Hashana is a time to tour events of our past year and to re-examine the artwork of our lives. Yom Kippur is a time to recount sins and errors and to think about what we could have done better. Succoth is a time to celebrate our accomplishments in a spirit of happiness.

Then we come to Shemini Hag Atsereth—a blank wall. This is a holiday with no frills, no shofar, no fasting, no lulav, no succah. The blank wall symbolizes our sadness, regrets, possibilities, hopes, and aspirations.

After what we have experienced during the holiday season, we now reach a blank wall; we are called upon to start working on our new masterpiece—the life still ahead of us. It is time to rally our strength, our wisdom, our sensitivities to the needs of others.

The “blank wall” attracts us because it is latent with opportunities, it opens new challenges, it calls on us to imagine what we can be and what we can create in the year and years ahead.

It is fitting that Simhat Torah is associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth. This is a reminder that the art of the blank wall can be meaningfully restored if we ourselves rejoice in our Torah heritage. The spiritual power of Torah has infused the Jewish people for thousands of years—and it has the power to help each of us develop our lives into a new, beautiful masterpiece.

Angel for Shabbat