Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuvah and Yom Kippur

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Although we popularly refer to the upcoming fast day as Yom Kippur, the Torah calls it Yom haKippurim—the day of atonements (in the plural). The plural form reminds us that there are many roads to atonement. Each person is different and is on a unique spiritual level; each comes with different insights, experiences, memories. The roads to atonement are plural, because no two of us have identical needs.

This season of Teshuvah and Kapparah—repentance and atonement—provides us with a special challenge and opportunity. We are granted a yearly period of time for intense evaluation of our lives. This period should serve as a springboard to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The first step in the process of spiritual renewal is to become humbly aware of our frailties. No matter how successful we think we are, we are mortal! We have limited physical capacities and a limited time of life on this earth. Aside from our physical limitations, we have moral and religious shortcomings that must be confronted. The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, suggested that a person grows only after confronting deep existential crisis. “These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.” The first goal of this season is to feel “shipwrecked.”

But when we do “come up against our own reality” we often reach a point of perplexity. How are we to make ultimate sense of our lives? How are we to understand the vagaries of human existence—disease, wars, injustice? How are we to deal with all the social and professional pressures? How can we cope with problems in our families and communities? How can we advance beyond the quagmire of fear and self-doubt?

The famous Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked: Where is God? And he answered: Where ever a human being lets Him in! If we want to feel the presence of God, we need to open ourselves to that experience. The season of Teshuvah and Yom haKippurim is a time to restore our relationship with the Almighty, to express our perplexities. This genuine experience of relationship with God gives us the inner strength to cope with our problems and perplexities.

A further step in the process of Teshuvah and Kapparah is balancing the feelings of alienation and belonging. We say to the Almighty: “ki ger anokhi imakh; toshav kekhol avotai,” I am a stranger with You, a sojourner as were all of my ancestors. What does this mean? I feel as though I am a stranger, alienated from God; there are barriers between me and You. But I want to be a sojourner, a permanent resident in Your presence, not a stranger or a passing visitor. I want to come home to the teachings and traditions of my ancestors who have maintained faith and courage for the past 3500 years.

A parable: A person tries to cut down a tree with a dull edged saw. He works very hard but makes little progress. A passerby sees this and asks: why don’t you sharpen the saw? The person responds: I don’t have time, I can’t stop working, I need to cut down this tree. The passerby says: But if you would stop working for a few minutes to sharpen the saw, you would actually save time and effort, and you would better be able to accomplish your goal! The person replies: No, I don’t have time to stop working, I must keep sawing.
Without the proper tools, we exert great energy but achieve inadequate results.

In spiritual life, too, we need proper tools. If we work with old habits, with stubborn attachment to stale and futile patterns, we will not grow. We need to think more clearly about our goals and how we can best attain them. Yom haKippurim provides a day when we take off from our usual routine. It is an entirely different kind of day from any other day of the year. It is a time to sharpen ourselves spiritually; to humbly face our limitations; to cope with our perplexities; to seek atonement and purification, to return to our spiritual core.

The season of Teshuvah and Kapparah provides us with a unique spiritual opportunity. Happy are they who can experience this season with an acute mind and alert spirit.

Angel for Shabbat