Deeper Meanings: Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Shabbat Teshuva/Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Eleanor Roosevelt once noted: “Do not hesitate to do what you think you cannot do. Dare to reach beyond your perceived limits. Do not let yourself be trapped within the narrow confines of narrow thinking. Do not let past defeats and failures drag you down."

Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of Jewish optimism in our ability to grow, change, and redefine ourselves. It is a day to cleanse ourselves of our past failings and sins, and to
imagine ourselves beginning a new phase in our lives.

Yom Kippur aims at our spiritual selves. It calls for a transformation in the way we see things and the way we experience things. It wants us to confront reality more clearly than we have done in the past. Young or old, this is a time for renewal and re-invigoration.

There is a famous story about a shohet (ritual slaughterer) who came to a new town and wanted to be employed by the community. As was the custom, he came to the town’s rabbi and sought approval. The rabbi asked the shohet to demonstrate how he prepared the knife for the slaughter of animals. The shohet showed how he sharpened the knife; and he ran his thumb up and down the blade checking for any possible nicks. When he completed the demonstration, he looked to the rabbi for validation.

The rabbi asked: “From whom did you learn to be a shohet?”
The shohet answered: “I learned from the illustrious Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov.”

The rabbi replied: “Yes, you have performed the task of sharpening and checking the knife very well. However, you did not do so in the manner of the Baal Shem Tov. When the Baal Shem Tov checks the knife, he always has tears in his eyes.”

Yes, the shohet had learned the technical skills of his trade—but he did not plumb the depths of his work. He had not internalized the emotional, psychological and spiritual elements that were the hallmark of his teacher. He was technically proficient—but he had no tears in his eyes.

Religious life (and life in general!)can sometimes be technically correct; but at the same time it might be missing the inner spiritual content, the tears in the eyes. A synagogue service might be conducted with great accuracy, and yet fail to produce a real religious experience. A person might fast and pray all day on Yom Kippur, and yet be exactly the same person at the end of the day as he/she was at the beginning of the day.

If Yom Kippur is observed without our realizing the deeper significance of the moment, then it is just another lost opportunity.

Yom Kippur offers us purification, a fresh start, a revived spirit. It reminds us of who we are and who we can yet become. It dares us to transcend our past limits. If we experience Yom Kippur deeply and clearly, we will face the adventure of life with renewed strength and wisdom.

The MIshnah (Taanit 4:8) quotes Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that Yom Kippur was one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar (the other being the 15th day of Av). We should draw on this spirit of optimism as we observe Yom Kippur, recognizing that this day offers us a unique gift: the gift of personal renewal.

Tizku leShanim Rabbot.

Angel for Shabbat