

Thoughts for the Rosh Hashana Season

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(This week's Angel for Shabbat column is a sermon I delivered at Congregation Shearith Israel on Rosh HaShana, 5769. Its message continues to be relevant. I wish you all a happy, healthy New Year. Tizku leShanim Rabbot.)

Gilda and I recently were invited to attend a charity dinner at a very fancy New York hotel. The moment we arrived, we immediately knew we might have been happier if we had stayed at home!

We, of course, tried to be “non-judgmental”. Nonetheless, we were unfavorably impressed with the many women dressed (or not quite dressed) in outlandish outfits, with ludicrous hairdos, with gaudy jewelry dangling as conspicuously as possible. We were equally unimpressed with the many men who dressed in flashy tuxedos with flamboyant suspenders, gold necklaces, and with their hair dyed—except for the gray sideburns—and greased back.

When we looked at these people, we saw pomposity, stupidity, terrible taste, vanity.

But then I thought: when these people looked in the mirror before leaving for the fancy dinner, what did they see? How did they view themselves? The answer is: they probably saw themselves as attractive, elegant, fashionable, and perhaps 20 or 30 years younger than they really were.

What could account for the vast discrepancy in how I described them, and how they would have described themselves? The answer is: we don't always see ourselves objectively! We see ourselves and judge ourselves in the best possible light; we don't even realize when we are deluding ourselves.

The New York Times recently reported that 97% of the retirees of the Long Island Railroad claimed disabilities upon retirement and therefore received extra pension payments. This practice has cost hundreds of millions of dollars. It is truly amazing that all these workers were healthy during their working years, and suddenly became disabled the day they retired. It is equally amazing that doctors signed statements confirming these disabilities, and that administrators paid out these disability claims so readily. Based on the newspaper reports, we would conclude that there are a lot of cheaters who are literally stealing money from the public. But how do these people see themselves? They see themselves as good, honest, fine people. They are just going along with the system, not doing anything different from anyone else. They put in their years of service, and now they are “entitled” to take whatever they can get. The company can afford it! The public will pay!

Or let us turn (a bit grimly) to the current financial crisis gripping our nation and the world at large. Huge companies have gone bankrupt. Corporations have been horribly mismanaged. The sub-prime mortgage scandal reflects greed, poor judgment, misleading of investors. All of us have been hurt by this crisis, our assets are down, our pension funds are down. We might come up with choice words to express our opinion of the corporate leaders who have enriched themselves at the public’s expense, and who have brought on a global financial panic. Yet, how do the corporate leaders who have caused this crisis view themselves? They see themselves as honest and upstanding business people who tried to maximize profits for their companies. They only did what others were also doing. They have not offered to return the many millions of dollars they were paid in salaries and bonuses, while their ineptitude caused financial distress and ruin to so many of their victims. They feel that they earned their money fairly.

Does anyone say: I’m really a bad person who tries to do evil and to hurt others? Even terrorists claim to be good people acting on behalf of a noble cause. Criminals claim to be good people, forced into crime by poverty and other social ills.

The fact is: it is human nature to judge ourselves in the most charitable way. Indeed, human beings who always feel that they are wrong and guilty—these people need to see a psychiatrist to deal with their poor self-esteem. Most people feel comfortable with themselves and see themselves favorably.

These observations also apply to us in our religious life. Rarely have I heard anyone say: “I’m really a bad, unspiritual person. I know what our religion teaches and I willfully reject it and ignore it, because I’m just no good.” More often, people

say: "I do my best; I'm better than many others; I may not study much Torah and may not observe the mitzvot too carefully, but I mean well. I do many good things. God will understand."

Our self-perception sometimes borders on self-delusion. We wear masks, we rationalize, we make excuses, we justify ourselves.

The High Holy Day season, beginning with the month of Elul, is a period of teshuva, repentance. This is a time to take off masks, to cut through our excuses, and to see ourselves as honestly and clearly as possible. Surely, we have many virtues. But we also have deficiencies, areas where we can improve. If we can adjust our self-perception, we can really be so much better and so much happier.

But how can we gain a proper perspective on ourselves? We can't rely entirely on our own opinions of ourselves, since we tend to glorify our virtues and downplay our failings. We can't even rely on what others may say about us, since they may be judging us by the wrong standards as well, and either over-praise us or over-criticize us.

Each year at this season, I call to mind two Talmudic passages that help me put things into perspective. One deals with a great sage, Akavia ben Mahalalel. Akavia was at odds with his colleagues on several points of halakha. Although he was a minority of one, he would not concede to the majority rulings. His colleagues made him an offer: "Akavia, if you will retract your views and accept ours, we will make you head of the Sanhedrin. You will then have great status and great authority." Akavia declined this offer, and responded with an immortal line: "I prefer to be called a fool every day of my life, but not be wicked in the eyes of God for even a moment." Akavia taught us something very important. We must try to view our lives, to the extent possible, from the vantage point of God. If we realize that we will have an accounting to give and that we will not be able to deceive the Judge in any way, we can hope to keep proper perspective on our lives. Our goal is not to impress others, not to gain power or wealth, not to win ephemeral success, not to outsmart "the system": our goal is to be able to stand honestly in God's presence. We must try to live our lives so as not to be wicked in the eyes of God for even an instant.

The other Talmudic passage tells of the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. This young man, a promising scholar in his own right, died. The grief was great. But then, amazingly, the son came back to life. (Perhaps this is an early example of the near-death phenomenon which is being studied by modern psychologists and doctors.) The joy was great. Rabbi Yehoshua realized that his son had gone to the

next world and had now returned to this world. Rabbi Yehoshua asked his son: what did you see in the next world? The son replied: olam hafukh ra-iti, I saw a topsy-turvy world. Those who are great in this world, are of little account in the next world. Those who are little-esteemed in this world, are highly honored in the next world. Rabbi Yehoshua stated: no, son, you did not see a topsy-turvy world. You saw things as they really are, olam barur ra-ita.

The message of this story is that ultimate reality is the truth from the vantage point of God and from the vantage point of the next world. In this world, we are easily deceived. We think of some people as powerful and great and successful—when in fact they are little-esteemed in the next world. We think of some people as insignificant, powerless, unsuccessful—when in fact they are highly-esteemed in the eyes of God.

Our rabbinic sages, in describing Rosh Hashanah, drew on the symbol of the Book of Life. The imagery is that God sits in judgment over each of us, and decides in which book to inscribe our names. What this symbolism is really teaching is: our lives need to be viewed in perspective of God's judgment, and that we are answerable for ourselves to God. That is what is ultimately important and genuine. No more self-delusion, no more mask-wearing, no more chasing after illusions and shadows. When we look into the mirror, we should see who we really are—not idealized versions of who we think we are.

During this period of Teshuva, may we more clearly develop our self-perception; more wisely lead our lives; more happily and meaningfully strengthen ourselves, our families and our community. Amen.