

BCC, Sept. 22, 2000
Shabbat before RH
Parashiyot Nitzavim and Vayeilech
Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Here are some random comments made to me lately: "I don't know what to do." "I don't know what I want." "How did I get myself into this situation?" "How do I get myself out of this situation?" In some cases the uncertainty - the surprise -- has been brought on by the person's tendency to live life kind of day by day, without much thought. And in some cases their sudden distress has come on the heels of a lot of self-examination - which is, after all, what we're supposed to be doing during this month of Elul, this month before the Days of Awe. We're supposed to be doing that heshbon hanefesh thing, taking an "accounting of the soul." Reflecting on our lives, examining with diligence and taking responsibility for what part we've played in getting ourselves to this point - whatever this point is.

But self-examination can be a dangerous thing. Someone said to me recently: "I wish I'd never started examining my life during this month of Elul, now that I'm looking I realize I'm not very happy." Of course what wasn't said, but what I heard next anyway, was the unspoken line that went something like, "[A]nd it's all your fault, Rabbi, if you hadn't encouraged me to be self-reflective, I wouldn't be in this mess. I wasn't ready to be self-reflective!" etc. Oy! and just my luck, that page seems to be missing from the rabbi's manual - the page of what to do when you get blamed for a congregant's "unhappiness" (not to mention the times when it really is my fault!).

But blame me or no, it's true that all month I have been encouraging people to do what Jewish tradition teaches us to do at this time of year - to examine our lives. "An unexamined life is not worth living," said Plato [Apology, 38] but we know from experience that an examined life is not always easy to keep living. It's not a risk-free project - this self-accounting, self-reflection. Every year people sometimes discover some

unexpected things. Indeed, it is often a somber exercise - this attempt to live deliberately, thoughtfully. It is not a guarantee of instant improvement or happiness. So why do it? We ought to do it because it is a guarantee, I think, of growth. We ought to do it because to be more self-aware is to be more alive. We do it because of what Plato said - that "an unexamined life is not worth living," (although, in truth, I might argue that for certain lives). We do it because of what this week's Torah portion, Nitzavim, says (part of which we'll read again on Yom Kippur morning): I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life - if you and your offspring would live - by loving God." [Deut 30:19-20] Examining our lives, taking a self-accounting, is a way of choosing life and a way of loving God who gave us this life to live.

Every year at this time, as I first fight and then welcome the fact that it is Elul again, that a whole year has passed (on the secular calendar nearly 13 months have passed this time) since last we called ourselves to the task of noticing the changing, the growth, of a life; since last we called ourselves to the task of deliberately trying to make changes in the way we live our lives. For me, during this month -- as I watch the moon move through her phases -- it's more noticeable too how quickly time does pass, and how slowly most of us make change. The moon reminds me too that the other task we are called to in this month of Elul is the task of simply noticing the passing of time. I love that the Jews took on a calendar that shows us, nightly, if we watch the moon, the passing of time. We can see in the moon's phases, in her waxing and waning, and rising and setting, the passing of time in our own lives; the rhythm of our own lives - our highs and our lows, the times we hide parts of ourselves so that just a sliver shows, and the times we let our whole self shine forth to others.

Judaism goes to great lengths to keep us aware of time passing. For even our ancestors, though they led lives incredibly different from ours, knew that time can easily slip through our fingers before we know it, and take with it all we meant to do. And so our tradition tries to tell us to be aware of time, and the way it can sneak up on a life. It tries to tell us, in some ingenious ways, I think, to stop and breathe and to live our lives fully. Shabbat, coming as it does every week, is one way our tradition tries, not to slow down time, but to slow us down in time. And this "time of year," this season of turning and reflection that leads up to and through the Days of Awe, is another way our tradition asks us to pay

attention to time. Getting ready for the Days of Awe, doing the work of tshuvah, of repentance, of cheshbon hanefesh, taking an accounting of the soul, cannot be done in a hurry. This is no easy task for most of us -- certainly not for those of us who help organize and lead our high holy day services -- things seem to speed up this time of year, not slow down. But the truth is, slowing down is seldom easy for any of us. We get forty days every year to slow down and be reflective. Given my increased responsibilities at this time of year, I'm trying to learn how to be reflective at a fast pace, but I don't really think it can be done. The haftarah for this week comes from Isaiah and is often the one read before Rosh Hashanah. It begins dirshu Adonai b'hi-matz'o, sometimes translated: "seek the Eternal while there is still time." The Hebrew can also be translated: "Seek the Eternal in the way that God can be found." [Is. 55:6]

"Call out while God is near," continues Isaiah. And our sages chose to read that verse right now, this week, this Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah because, they say, God is very near right now in this season of tshuvah - of turning, of tefilah - of prayer, of tzedakah-of just acts, God is near right now and about to come even nearer, about to come as close as God ever gets--right into our hearts. How does this happen? Is it just because this is the time of year for it? Once a year, ready or not, God comes near? The Torah portion for this week before Rosh Hashanah suggests otherwise, suggests God comes near because we allow it, because we turn toward God. Moses tells us: "[when] you return to God your God and listen to God's voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your being,

God your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you: God will return to collect you from all the peoples where God your God has scattered you. Even if you be thrust away to the ends of the heavens, God your God will collect you from there, from there God will take you, and will bring you to the land that your ancestors possessed, and you shall possess it" [Deut. 30:2-5].

During this time of year, at least, I think the phrase "the land our ancestors possessed" refers not to a geographical location, but to a different sort of Promised Land, not to a place called Israel, but to a place inside the hearts of the people Israel. When you turn to God your God...then God, your God, will turn to you. IF God is turning to us right now, in this season, it is NOT because it is this season. IF God is turning to us, right now, it is BECAUSE we're about to open our hearts as wide as we ever do, wide enough to let God in, or perhaps we should say wide enough to feel God's presence right there -- [point to your heart] right here -- where God has always been. "Then God will open up your heart . . . to love God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live," says our Torah portion [Deut. 30:6]. This is not about living a long life; this is about living an examined life. It's about taking it all in along the way, rather than coming up surprised again and again. It's about living our lives as deliberately as we can (while still remaining open to new challenges, unexpected opportunities). It's about learning to use our past as a direction-giver, without becoming stuck in it, without trying to live in the past, without spending the rest of our lives longing for the past, or regretting it. When we turn to God in such an open-hearted way, with love, appreciating - noticing -- all that comes to us, then, says Torah, God will turn to us.

"Seek God in a way God can be found," says Isaiah -- perhaps that way is with an open heart and a

loving soul. In this time of year, when we are so aware of time passing, may we open up our hearts to God and one another; may we come to understand and appreciate how we pass the time.

Shabbat Shalom. Shanah tovah