

The Time to Take Note of Ourselves - Part 2

Rosh Hashanna Morning

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Beth Chayim Chadashim

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It's the time to take an authentic accounting of our souls—a heshbon hanefesh. As harsh as this may seem, this is also a time of celebration, a time of new beginnings, and a time of special opportunities. The Unentaneh Tokef, our ultimate prayer of judgment that speaks in terms of who will live and die, uses terms of hope. The severe decree of death can be averted with repentance, prayer and righteousness—teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah. God is depicted as a merciful judge who understands our frail nature. God knows that we have drifted from our holy paths. On this day, we too are asked to acknowledge that we have strayed. Let us now focus our thoughts on ourselves. How will we move forward rehabilitated and refreshed? As we ease towards Yom Kippur, our focus will shift to forgiveness. As we identify those instances where we went astray, let us judge ourselves compassionately and find a means to return to the right path.

Now that we all know about my choices of television programming, you'll be happy to hear that my reading is a little bit more sophisticated. This summer, I plunged into many novels that forced me to re-evaluate my perceptions of societies around the world. How easy it is, for example, to look at towns and cities in Africa and only see them through Western eyes! I may have some of the answers for problems that I face. But these solutions are likely not so helpful in India, Rwanda and Afghanistan. To expound on this point, I would like to share with you a passage from the book, *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver.

The book transports the reader to the Congo, where a Southern family relocates, in the hope of helping the African population find the ways of God. Four young girls, their dedicated mother, and their impassioned preacher father set forth on what is described as an impossible mission. The barriers between this family and the locals of the Congo were only superficially the result of color, race and background. The wall dividing the two groups had to do with the missionary family refusing to grasp that their personal perspective was very different than that of the nearby African population.

For instance, one summer, the blazing sun brought forth a heated tension in the small Congolese village. Tears were shed, shouts were screamed and pain was endured everywhere. Children yearned for food, their bellies aching with hunger. Cries were proclaimed throughout the region, pleas for the gift of rain. The market stands may have been open, but there were no goods to share or trade. Amidst this sorrowful scene, the determined Reverend had spoken with every mother who had lost a child. Some of these women were pregnant again. He reported to his family after a long day's work: "these women don't wish to speak of the dead. They will not say their children's names." He had tried to explain how baptism, the batiza, would have changed everything. But the mothers tell him no, no, they had already tied the nkisi around the child's neck in order to ward off evil. They were good mothers, they did not neglect this protection, they tell the Reverend.

Little did the Reverend know that some children had been lost in the rivers to crocodiles, and proposing to immerse them in these supposed holy waters was unfathomable for the mothers. To the Reverend, he was doing everything that he could to save the souls of the children. To the parents, he was sentencing the children to death. Neither party was in any place to conceptualize the demands of the other. Both yearned for better days, yet their acts were often unrecognizable.

This rather extreme example displays how easy it is misjudge others when applying our own standards and values to them. Often we are quick to judge, when we know little of the relevant information necessary to come to appropriate conclusions. We're so busy casting our personal observations at others, that we have forgotten to keep ourselves in check. What a different world it would be if we could rely on each member of the globe to authentically judge his or her own acts. We are often clueless as to the motives, concerns and passions of the other, but nonetheless we are often quick to assumptions about these acts. On the eve of the New Year, rather than focusing our energies elsewhere, now is the time for some introspection.

The Ba'al Shem Tov spoke of a Hasidic rabbi that asked a member of his congregation: "If you are going east and suddenly you want to travel west, how far do you have to go?" The man gave many complex answers, but the rabbi simply answered, "If you are going east and you want to go west, all you have to do is turn around. It's as simple as that!"

How can we find the right path? How can we redirect our judgment of others to properly focus on ourselves? How can we remind ourselves that we often do not know the whole picture and that our perspective is likely unique, just like that of our neighbor's? In the words of the Ba'al Shem Tov, we simply must turn around and refocus. This is the time to turn within.

The chief Rabbi of England, Jonathan Sacks, gives us many active tools that we can use to build a strong society based on dialogue and listening. In his book, the Dignity of Difference, he stresses that we live in a world plentiful with diversity. In this world, religion has the potential to serve as the solution amidst our strife. Sacks emphasizes the importance of living with a sense of reverence, acknowledging the existence of a greater power. And yet, there is a piece of the Eternal in each of us. Amongst our difference, we are all created in God's image. Focusing on "Us", we are quick to establish a "Them," but a spark of the Divine rests in all. We simply must open our eyes to appreciate the shining lights. The global age has turned our world into a society of strangers. It is time to turn to the stranger, and find God within. Often this is challenging. How can we face those who we distrust who have caused so much destruction? It is much easier to simply judge and move on. Only forgiveness breaks the chain. Forgiveness represents our ability to change course. With our covenant with God as a model, let us make partnerships with those who we fear, acknowledging the integrity of the other and marching forward with hope. Sacks speaks of an ideal when our societies represent places of dialogue. Rather than living in our individual bubbles, we can prioritize engaging those around us in meaningful conversation. We can learn the intimate tales that define who we are. We can hear of triumphs and sorrows, successes and pains. We can discover commonalities even amongst so many

differences. It is harder to judge those who we really know. Our families, institutions and communities ought to be places of words and intake, not judgment and generalizations.

Recently in a class that I am taking focusing on spirituality, I have taken extended moments of silence. I have penciled off blocks of time in my week to turn off my ipod, ignore my e-mail, forget about spoken words, and to simply sit in peace and quiet. I have focused my energies inwards, rather than out. My breath has centered me, helping me to acknowledge the day. There is no hiding from the silence that I often fear. It is a time to focus on me.

How else can we get back on the right path? We can avoid superficial generalizations, recognizing that we rarely have any real expertise in appreciating the whole situation. We can give our neighbors the benefit of the doubt, refraining from quick judgments and condemnations. Rather than avoiding those who we dislike, we can encounter these individuals, speaking and listening, building relationships and modeling care and concern rather than fear and divisiveness. When expressing our doubts of the other, we can remember the consequences that judgment has had upon us. When focusing too intuitively on the other, we could look inside, perhaps identifying in ourselves what we have been avoiding.

Was Brie right to abandon her son? Was Sarah right to ask Abraham to banish his son? I don't have the answers to either of these questions. However, was I right in many of my acts this past year? This is a question that I can pursue and hope to understand. In these 10 days leading to Yom Kippur, let's take note of our lives with the use of very personal questions. It is time to dig deep within our souls and to find a means to take account of our thoughts and actions this past year. Let's review our own acts and specifically, not those of others as we move forward: hopeful, reenergized and ready!

Ken Yechi L'Ratzon!