

Living A Life That Matters

And God spoke to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai and said to him,

“Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk!”

And Moses responded, “Let me get this straight: You don’t want us to cook meat products and milk products together!”

“No,” God says, “I simply don’t want you to cook a kid in its mother’s milk.”

“Oh, oh, I see,” Moses says, “you want us to have separate dishes for foods that are dairy and foods that contain meat!”

“No, really, all I am asking is that you don’t cook a kid in its mother’s milk!”

“Oh, how could I have been so dense?! What you are really saying is that we should wait 6 hours after we eat meat before we eat dairy!”

“Ach, go ahead, do whatever you want!”

This humorous story highlights for us, perhaps, one the most critical questions raised in our hearts and minds at this time of year, during this time of self-reflection and soul-searching: Does what we do really matter?! Who is keeping score, anyway? Does Anybody (with a capital ‘A’) care if I eat that cheese burger? Furthermore, does ANYBODY care I cheat on my taxes, treat others with kindness and respect or not, or strive to be an honest, upstanding mensch? And, if the answer really is, “Go ahead do whatever you want, because you can!,” why should I care about my behavior? Why should I bother trying to improve myself, becoming a better person each year? After all, it’s a lot of hard work to change and grow

towards goodness if there is no real difference in the end, whether I play by the rules or not, if we all meet the same fate—death.

Our High Holy Days, through powerful symbolic language and imagery, mysterious metaphors, and soul-stirring music, bring us a radically different message: The kind of person we ARE makes a huge difference! What we Do and Say does matter! And, ultimately, each of us bears the responsibility and consequences for our actions. These sacred Days of Awe contain something much more real and relevant than can be discerned with the naked eye; more complex and nuanced than can be grasped with purely rational thought. Therefore, it is not a simple, straightforward task to unlock the secret treasures of these Holy Days—with all of their imagery of heavenly books being inscribed with life and death sentences, God sitting in judgement of us, and an intense focus on the myriad ways we have gone astray. In fact, Rabbi Larry Kushner teaches, “the language of prayer is designed to scramble language, mess with our brains, take us to rationality’s edge, and then give a push. All the good stuff transcends language.” (Rabbi Larry Kushner, *Machzor: Challenge and Change*; p. 250) Hidden among these ancient metaphors are eternal messages—in no language and in all languages—to move us, inspire us, and transform us into the people we are always hoping we will become.

Each year, as an entire people, for ten days, we step out of our normal, often crazy, day-to-day existence to get a new perspective on our lives and how we can move closer to living our ideals, becoming our very best selves. But the treasures of the tradition will not simply materialize before our eyes. We need to do the work required to make these Holy Days

meaningful. The choice is up to us. We need to engage with the rich metaphors and opportunities afforded by these days. This language beckons us to approach the reality of our lives with the fullness of our hearts and a deep intention. In his book, This is Real and You are Totally Unprepared, Rabbi Alan Lew z"l offers us another way of understanding the real transformational power inherent in our Days of Awe:

"[I]t is real whether you believe in God or not. Perhaps God made it real and perhaps God did not. Perhaps God created this pageant of judgment and choice, of transformation, of life and of death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and The Book of Death, Teshuvah and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture. It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case. The weeks and months and the years are also inventions of human culture. Time and biology are inventions of human culture. Language and stories, love and tragedy, are inventions of human culture. But they are all matters of life and death, all real and all inescapable. Even though we invented the idea of weeks, we die when our allotted number of weeks has gone by. So if the event is merely the product of human culture, it is the product of an exceedingly rich culture, one that has been accumulating focus and force for three thousand years." (p. 105)

So, you see, it is irrelevant whether we "believe" the symbolic images of the Days of Awe. What is important is whether they can touch our lives with meaning and purpose. Can we use these metaphors to wake us up to the mysterious gift of life itself? Can our encounters with this holy time enable us to become newly mindful that we don't have to be the people we have

become? Today, we have the power to reimagine the contours of our relationships and our lives. These Days of Awe invite us to actively re-energize our lives. But we must reflect deeply, dream boldly, and be open to discovering a renewed sense of wonder and purpose.

Let's explore some of the major themes and images from these High Holy Days, now, to see what they might teach us about the power of our actions and the importance of pursuing ways to affirm, support and foster Life.

Bob Alper, who happens to be a rabbi and a comedian (yes, that's a thing!), tells the story about the woman who complains to him at the High Holy Days that she has been calling and calling the Temple, but no one ever answers. What number have you been dialing the rabbi asks her. The one right here at the top of the temple bulletin: Tishri 1-5777.

As we enter this brand new year of 5777, we begin with this big idea that our High Holy Days celebrate the Birthday of the World, the creation of humans, in fact. What can that possibly mean to us as moderns who certainly don't really believe that humans, let alone the whole world, has only been around for less than 6,000 years? Ah, but this is mythic time, Jewish sacred time! As we approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we enter a time out of time, beyond and somehow not a part of our "regular" lives anchored in 2016. Jewish time is not about science and logic. Instead, it is a subtle reminder that things are not simply what they appear to be on the surface. The Jewish accounting of the years reminds us to open our minds to new possibilities. We take a break from the normal flow of time, entering the alternative flow of religious time, where we can, for a brief

period, recalibrate our lives and more fully inhabit them. What is most important: we can bring the wisdom revealed to us in this alternate time back with us into our “normal” lives.

The Birthday of the World is a rich, religious construct within our sacred cycle of time. The new year has the potential to bring us into contact with all that is precious. Our time here is precious, our planet is unbelievably precious, life itself is dear beyond measure. This understanding of the world’s rebirth urges us to take our limited time here on this planet seriously and to live each day with mindful awareness and an ever-deepening sense of our ultimate purpose.

The Book of Life, another prominent Holy Day image, can also be seen as a metaphor for the ongoing assessment of our lives. It suggests that everything we do does count and is counted and needs to be accounted for. At this time of year, we need to contemplate our deeds, as the “book” is all about how we have lived. We notice what we have done and also what we have left undone. This book is ours to inscribe, and we will live with what we have written there in our own hand. This metaphor emphasizes that we have control over our actions and the choices that we make. Ultimately, what we do matters! Our fates are not all equal! We all do die, but we can choose to live very different lives. The lives we create for ourselves that are defined by dignity, generosity, acceptance and humility trump the life that is small-minded, divisive, and self-serving. A life dedicated to justice, joy and freedom is valued, in our book, far above lives that are not. We symbolize our belief in living a good life with the wish that one another is inscribed and sealed in this Book for life and blessings. A life

of goodness is something we aspire towards and value as the Holy Days encourage us to rededicate ourselves each year to life-giving actions.

On one side of the scale sits human agency, which we have just seen is truly important. On the other side, our naked vulnerability. There are many things in this life that are also beyond our understanding or control. To help us experience our own vulnerability, the Holy Days introduces another central metaphor that depicts God sitting in judgement over the entire world, deciding the fate of every living being; mustering and counting us as a shepherd would his sheep. On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die, who at their time and who before their time, who by fire and who by water. An awe-inspiring and even fear inducing image.

This symbolic imagining of “God the Judge” is not meant, I believe, as a refutation of our human agency. Nor should we ascribe to the Divine a perverse desire to punish us for every little wrong we committed, like a Jewish Santa checking his list twice. I believe our tradition wants us, through this image, to reject the idea: “Ach, go ahead, do whatever you want!” This metaphor suggests: we are all held accountable to some higher authority beyond ourselves. “God the Judge” symbolizes all that is good and right for the world, and towards which we strive. As humans, we want to know, deep down, that there is a right and wrong in the world. Otherwise, what difference does it make for us to endeavor to become a good, loving person? Goodness, surely, is its own reward, but we have a fundamental human need to believe that, in the end, our sense of doing good is appreciated and judged in a universal way, outside of our mere small

selves. We want affirmation that our legacy of living justly, helping others in need and repairing the world will endure beyond our limited lives. All of the deep metaphors of the holy days give us that assurance, that our deeds do matter. This **doesn't** necessarily mean that the final judgement will be rendered in some heavenly court. Perhaps the greatest judgement we can receive is that of our family and friends, our community, who deem our lives worthy of respect and admiration, and even emulation.

And, in the end, even as we stand before the throne of justice, always tempered by compassion and mercy, facing the insecurity and anxiety around the unknowns in our lives, our liturgy gives us back the means to direct the course of our lives. We cannot always choose what happens to us in this life, but we can choose how we will respond to what happens to us. Because we are human, we are bound to experience bitterness at some point in our lives: loss, disappointment, failure, or heartache. We are reassured by the U'netaneh Tokef prayer that if we choose to approach our lives with a deep connection to what is sacred and spiritually uplifting (t'fillah), create a rich inner-life that is honest and clear about who we are and who we can become (teshuvah) and embrace a commitment to making a difference out in the world, in the lives of others (tzedakah) then we will know that our lives will be filled with meaning and purpose; our lives will have made a lasting impact.

Let us use these precious Days of Awe to their fullest:

To embrace the mysterious power of this time to make our days count.

To immerse ourselves in this sacred time so that we will truly count each of our days.

To write with care in the Book of our Lives so that we will be sealed for a life of blessings now and in the future.

To live each day with the knowledge that what we do and who we are matters. To us. To our loved ones. To our community. To the larger world. And to God.

ken y'hi ratzon