

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

The High Holy Days: Belief in Man

The Rosh Hashanah – Yom Kippur season is upon us, filling our minds and hearts with so many thoughts and emotions that go beyond our normal framework. This unique time of the Jewish year stands in stark contrast to the New Year's experience marked by the Gregorian calendar: The approach to Rosh Hashanah is counted down by a month of prayer, introspection and rapprochement, while the approach to the secular new year is marked off in shopping days. Rosh Hashanah is steeped in awe and reverence; more often than not, 'new year's day' is characterized by the hangover left from a night of revelry. Throughout the ages and in every corner of the globe, Jews gather in synagogues to hear the shofar, not in Times Square; we kiss the Torah, and not the somewhat inebriated person who happens to be standing nearby.

Yet while our mood is more somber, our thoughts more serious, our holiday season has a festive, even celebratory element as well. This is the frame of mind that envelops us as we connect to holiness and re-discover the purity of our souls. In common with the secular celebration of the new year, we, too, make "new year's resolutions", although our aspirations are of a higher order and, it is hoped, our resolve greater and our follow-through more successful. Judaism instructs us to use this time to shine a spotlight on our lives and lifestyles. With great thought, soul searching and angst, we strip off the veneer and examine the core of our existence. We are given the opportunity to set aside this time to ask the great existential questions: Who am I? Who do I wish to be? Have I made the wrong choices? Am I falling short? What do I need to change?

Jews gather in synagogues to hear the shofar, not in Times Square; we kiss the Torah, and not the somewhat inebriated person who happens to be standing nearby

This process is called teshuva. To better understand the concept of teshuva, we may view it through the prism of concepts taken from our own frame of

reference. One approach is to consider our personal “balance sheet”; the traditional term for this approach is *heshbon nefesh*, a very personal calculation that allows us to measure the spiritual assets and liabilities accumulated over the course of our daily lives. The process of teshuva allows us to restructure- that is, to convert debt into equity, either through repentance and/or by taking decisions and actions to increase our assets. This is the ‘recovery plan’ at the core of the High Holy Days: Teshuva, tefilla (prayer) and tzedaka (acts of charity) turn us back from the brink of spiritual bankruptcy and dissolution.

The process of teshuva allows us to restructure- that is, to convert debt into equity

The scriptural source for the concept of teshuva is found in Parshat Nitzavim, the Torah reading for this coming Shabbat, read every year just before Rosh Hashanah:

And you will return to God your Lord, and you will obey Him, doing everything that I am commanding you today. You and your children [will repent] with all your heart and with all your soul. (Dvarim 30:2)

The verse seems quite clear, yet rabbinic authorities differ in their understanding of its implications. Some of the sages read this verse as a commandment, requiring every Jew to undergo the process of teshuva we have described. This approach focuses on the first word of the verse, “*ve-shavta*”, ‘and you will return’, and disregards the larger narrative context in which it appears. Other rabbinic authorities, reading the verse in context, understand it as a description of a time in the future when terrible things befall the Jewish people, and they return to God.

In this vein, we find an intriguing formulation in the writings of Maimonides. While apparently sidestepping the debate regarding teshuva as a commandment, Maimonides’ thoughts on this verse may be an even more powerful statement:

...The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of the exile, and will be redeemed immediately, as

stated [in the verse]: "There shall come a time when [you will experience] all these things... and you will return to God, your Lord..." (Maimonides, Mishne Torah: Laws of Teshuva 7:5)

For Maimonides, teshuva is not just a good idea and sound spiritual accounting; it is the destiny of the Jewish People. This is our future, a glorious national renaissance in which the individuals that comprise the Jewish nation move closer to God and mend their ways. It is the culmination of our history, the light at the end of the tunnel of millennia of suffering and existential struggle.

In a sense, the belief in this glorious future is in actuality a belief in the Jewish People. It is a belief that, as a collective, we have the spiritual sensitivity, intelligence, fortitude and acumen to make the right decisions. It is the belief that each and every Jew has the power to move the nation as a whole in a positive direction. With this understanding, debating whether or not teshuva is a commandment becomes irrelevant; in this time of heightened awareness, people will undergo the process of repentance solely because it is sound spiritual advice. Whether or not it is required of us, we will be eager to fix the past and recalibrate our souls. We will not need to be commanded to take advantage of an opportunity for our debts to be erased, our spiritual books to be balanced.

Following Maimonides' formulation, the gathering of Jews in synagogues on the High Holy Days may be seen as a microcosm of the messianic age. When houses of prayer fill to capacity, when we feel the unprecedented pull of Jewish souls gravitating towards God, there is more than just guilt at play. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in the verse in Parshat Nitzavim, the expression of the great spiritual renaissance that is part and parcel of Jewish destiny.

May this holiday season be a harbinger of the messianic age, releasing us all from our spiritual debts and uplifting us to the great spiritual heights of which we are capable.

For a more in-depth analysis see <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/08/parshiot-nitzavim-and-vayelech-audio.html>