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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Ki Tavo / Selihot September 1, 2018 - 21 Elul 5778 REPRINT



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Eureka and Teshuva

Torah Reading: [Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Isaiah 60:1-22](#)

It finally really hit me last Tuesday night that the High Holy Days are coming, while I was sitting outside at LA's gorgeous Hollywood Bowl for a concert. A cool breeze blew through the hills, I momentarily shivered, and in that instant I knew it was autumn: time for honey cake; and shofarot; and also time for repentance. Why did this realization about the impending Days of Awe come to me then, I wondered, instead of in front of a sacred book, or at our beautiful minyan, while reciting the Hebrew month's extra Psalm preparing us for the High Holy Days?

I then recalled a favorite article, published nearly ten years ago in the New Yorker magazine, by Jonah Lehrer, titled "The Eureka Hunt." In that piece, Lehrer asked, "Why do big ideas come to us when they do and why at such strange moments?" In a journey that wends its way through history, military technology and neuroscience, Lehrer eventually concludes that our minds – despite popular belief about the need for exacting focus and careful attention – actually require relaxation, space and distraction to think outside the box and arrive at big ideas. Perhaps a cool Hollywood breeze while listening to the LA Phil isn't as strange a path to the Season of Repentance as I might have originally thought!

But as it turns out, our tradition already knew about the need for perspective to arrive at important realizations. At the very end of this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, Moshe begins his valedictory address to the community he has led for forty years, and confesses to them, "(up) to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear ... Yet observe faithfully all the terms of this covenant, that you may succeed in all that you undertake." (Deuteronomy 29:3, 8) Commenting upon Moshe's words, Rashi notes, that "It can take a student forty years to understand the wisdom of his (or her) teacher," but at the end of that span of time – with some perspective and distance to look back – sometimes the student will come to truly comprehend all that they learned. Essentially, we need a broad lens – not laser focus – to come to big realizations and deep understanding of our tradition's teachings as well.

As this Shabbat ends, we'll enter the final period of preparation for the High Holy Days, with the recitation of the Selichot Service in our synagogues. Having been reminded of both Rashi's, and Jonah Lehrer's, insights into how we come to find deep understanding of ourselves, and of our life choices, I want to propose a new suggestion to all of us this High Holy Day season, to help us open our hearts for real growth and change.

Let's all agree to try a new religious act, one that makes us a bit uncomfortable, or that feels foreign and strange. There are plenty of unique customs for the Days of Awe that fit this bill, so give one of them a try this year. For example, kapparot, the custom of spinning a live(!) chicken – or the monetary value of a chicken – over one's head on the eve of Yom Kippur, and then donating the chicken (or its value) to a poor family for their pre-fast meal. Imagine what it would feel like to hold that life in balance over your head, and then to commit that life force to sustaining the lives of a family in need. Or how about bowing - all the way to the ground - during the Aleinuprayer of the High Holy Day Musaf? How often do we make ourselves that physically small, uncomfortable, and vulnerable, in a public space and in the interest of our faith? What might that vulnerable physical experience do for our prayer lives? A final suggestion, give a shot at really reading through the Avodah Service (pages 326-335 in Mahzor Lev Shalem) to get a sense of what Yom Kippur felt like in the Temple. Those pages are the script, and it's nothing like Yom Kippur in any synagogue I have ever been to. Can you allow that story to transport you? Can you imagine what it must have felt like to have heard a High Priest declare "You have been cleansed," to the entire Jewish community gathered in Jerusalem on the year's holiest day? What would any of these journeys to the spiritual unknown do to our own religious thoughts, pulling us out of our well-worn, comfortable, religious paths? Might that shift in perspective open our minds and hearts and help us find something we didn't even know we were looking for? I sure hope so!

With all my best wishes for a Shabbat Shalom and a Shanah Tovah.

Rabbi Ephraim Pelcovits was previously the Assistant Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. His commentaries were written during his tenure. Rabbi Pelcovits is currently the Director, L.A. / Southern California Region of the New Israel Fund.



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