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Shabbat Vayeilekh / Shabbat Shuvah
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REPRINT

People, Get Ready

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 31:1 - 31:30

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 14:2-10; Joel 2:15-27; Micah 7:18-20

For the last several weeks, rabbinic colleagues have been posting Facebook updates celebrating finished sermons (or bemoaning writer's block).

Two rabbinic spouses (and a rabbi, aka me) met in Whole Foods not an hour after havdalah on the Saturday night before Rosh HaShanah.

Reviewing our shopping list one last time in the car Sunday morning with my husband to be sure we had gotten everything we needed, I said "I think we have everything. But I don't feel ready. I rarely if ever feel ready when Rosh HaShanah arrives."

As an academic, rather than one who serves a congregation (be it a synagogue, a Hillel, a nursing home, or

the like), even just for the High Holy Days (the Yamim Nora'im), preparing for this time of year often presents a different kind of challenge for me that it does for so many of my colleagues. Where they often spend the month of Elul immersed in the intense pressures of preparing for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur— planning services and practicing the prayers, writing sermons and teachings they know will be delivered to the largest audience of the year, making sure that everyone who needs will have tickets and places to eat – I am usually facing other, different concerns. The fall semester is usually starting just around this time of year, so I am thinking about syllabi, and course rosters and faculty meetings. Maybe my concerns at this time of year look more like those of people who work outside of the world of synagogues and Jewish institutions. Most places of work don't turn their primary attention to the approaching Holy Days at this time of year. And other concerns of life don't let up for the season either. Children still need to be cared for, meals need to be prepared and served, bills still need to be paid, and on and on and on. In fact, I suspect that even for my colleagues who are in congregational and communal positions, concern for the needs of the community can overwhelm their ability to engage in their own, personal spiritual preparation for the Yamim Nora'im.

Which brings me back to my conversation in the car with my husband on Sunday morning. In response to my comment, he wondered at the intense emphasis so many put on a month of spiritual preparation for the Yamim Nora'im. First of all, he noted, we have a name for the Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance, which we are in now, from the beginning of Rosh HaShanah to the shofar blast we will hear on Wednesday night at the end of Yom Kippur – but we don't call it the Forty Days of Repentance, do we? He also pointed out that though most don't, and don't like to, think about it, as mortal beings we live in radical uncertainty. Any moment could be our last, and it is at that moment that we hope to be "right" with the world and the people we care about. But how many of us will get ten days, let alone forty, to devote ourselves to preparing for that moment? Why should the work of teshuvah, repentance, be stretched out over an extended period of time, or, to put it differently, why should it be especially dedicated to this period of time in the year? Isn't it, or shouldn't it be, something we engage in at all times?

So, as it happens, by means not entirely planned, this year I did get some spiritual preparation for the Yamim Nora'im as it were handed to me. As some of you may know from my last drasha for this site, I completed the daf yomi cycle of daily Talmud study over the summer of 5772. I was not ready to begin that seven and half year process all over again, but neither did I want to give up the hard-earned habit of daily study. On the day after the daf yomi cycle ended, I began with the first chapter of the classic legal code of Maimonides (also commonly referred to as the Rambam), the Mishneh Torah. One of the intriguing things about this work is that Rambam felt it necessary to begin not with laws of daily practices and prayers, or of the annual cycle of Shabbat and holidays, but with what he felt were the most basic underpinnings of Jewish practice and beliefs: beliefs about the nature of God, the imperative of monotheism, the authority of Torah and the obligation to study it and honor its teachers. And therefore, the timing just happened to be such that for nine days before Rosh HaShanah and on the first day of Rosh HaShanah itself, I found myself reading a chapter a day of Hilchot Teshuvah, the Laws of Repentance.

And one of the things I was able to tell my husband is that the paradox he identified is hardly a new one; that it is one that Rambam addressed, as did rabbis before him going back at least to the time of the Mishnah, one of the foundational works of rabbinic Judaism. So what I have to offer for this Shabbat Shuvah, this Shabbat of Repentance, is less any answers – of my own, or the Rambam's or anyone else's – than an acknowledgment of the complexity of the problem, complexity which has its reflection in the Mishneh Torah (and the sources from which it was drawn). Particularly in Chapter 2 and 3 (though also elsewhere) of Hilchot Teshuvah, the reader can watch the author define, specify, delineate – and then immediately qualify, modify, redefine his categories. In 2:6, for example, he seems to address this point quite directly:

Even though repentance and crying out (for forgiveness) are always beneficial – during the Ten Days of Repentance which are between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur it is especially beneficial, and is received (by God) immediately, as it is said: "Seek the Lord while He can be found" (Isaiah 45:6).

Yet the passage immediately continues:

In what case do these words apply? Regarding the individual, but for the community (i.e., when the sin is a communal one), any time that they do teshuvah and cry out with a full heart – they are answered, as it is said: "[For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand] as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?" (Deut. 4:7)

2:7 then asserts that Yom Kippur is an especially propitious time for all to repent, whether individual or community, and all are obligated to confess and strive for repentance on that day. And yet – again – this is also where the Rambam notes the requirement to say a confession at the afternoon service, before Yom Kippur starts; moreover, one should do so before eating the final meal in anticipation of the fast, "lest one choke during the meal," before having the opportunity to confess on Yom Kippur itself. 2:9 adds yet another qualification, one that many of us may be familiar with: Yom Kippur atones only for those sins that affect our relationship with God – failures in the realm of ritual observance and religious commitment – but those sins and slights (or worse) that we have committed against other people can only be atoned by seeking forgiveness directly from the one(s) we have wronged, presumably at any time.

In 3:4, Rambam writes one of the most famous statements of the special significance of Rosh HaShanah and its rituals over other times of year for repentance:

Although the blast of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a scriptural decree (i.e., an obligatory act independent of any reason), there is a hint in it, that is to say: Wake, slumberers, from your sleep! Examine your acts, and return in repentance, and remember your Creator! Those who forget the truth with the woes of time and engage all year in what is useless and empty, which is not of benefit and does not succeed, pay heed to your souls and improve your ways and deeds.

And once again, the same passage continues to explore the paradox:

Therefore, a person must see him/herself for the entire year as if s/he were half innocent and half guilty... If one sins one sin – s/he tips him/herself and the whole world into the side of guilt... If one does one mitzvah – s/he tips him/herself and the whole world into the side of innocence... And because of this matter, it is the practice of all Israel to increase greatly in charity and good deeds and engage in mitzvot from Rosh HaShanah and until Yom Kippur, more than all the (rest of) the year.

We hang in the balance, personally and as a community all year. Any day, any meritorious deed performed or commandment observed could be the one that makes the difference. And yet we seek to tip that balance in our favor especially during these ten days.

In short, Jewish scholars through the ages have recognized that we cannot think about the month of Elul, or Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and these ten days in between, as an appointment on the calendar, dates to be circled and anticipated: "when the time comes I will..." For them to be special, they have to work towards being nothing special, towards being reminders of what we should be doing all year round. Once more, as Rambam writes in 7:2:

A person should always view him/herself as if s/he is leaning towards death, and perhaps will die immediately, and it might be found that s/he remains in his/her sins – therefore, one should repent of one's sins right away, and not say "when I will be worthy, I will repent," lest one die before one becomes worthy.

Maybe it is okay, even right, to feel unready for the Yamim Nora'im. Not, let me be clear, that I mean to dismiss or discourage attempts to prepare beforehand. But let us live in the paradox of needing these days

as a reminders and wake-up call to become our better selves, while knowing that the goal is not to need a special day for this purpose at all. Let our preparations be not an end in and of themselves, or a passing commitment, but the opening to a whole new year.

Shabbat shalom, shanah tovah, u'g'mar hatimah tova!

Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.



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