

## Rabbi Fox's Message for Temple Beth Shalom's Av/Elul 5767 (August 2007) Newsletter

### Same Time, Same Station . . . Different Show?

A birth, a death, an extraordinary experience or visit, a windfall, a loss, a spiritual high – all moments worth remembering and on which we reflect from time to time. Maybe you have had a special moment such as these in the past year. So, now what? What do you do with your elation or your grief, your resignation or your newly found openness? Our Jewish heritage has an answer: Reflect upon it and it will lead you to a new place in the coming year.

The Talmud teaches us that the Torah – often viewed as the core of our Jewish wisdom since it is the “source-book” of our people's very existence – is filled with such complexity that we may turn it again and again and it will always yield new clues, new pathways, to a life of purpose. In fact, the Torah is commonly referred to as having seventy faces (*shivim panim l'torah*). Why seventy faces? This is a symbolic number for one's lifetime; if we read each passage anew each year (our weekly Torah portion, or parasha), therefore we read each passage with new wisdom, new perspective, gained in the past year. Our tradition is advising us, essentially, that each year is another opportunity to refresh what may seem old, to make new that which seems finished.

The Rabbis were brilliant in their approach to the month of Elul, the final month of the Jewish calendar before Rosh Hashanah, in that they ensured that no holidays or memorials were honored during this transitional time from what was our past to what will be our future. The entire month's focus is on repentance. We are commanded to right the ship of our life so that we may meet the New Year without the encumbrance of a dragging anchor. The past is the past, but we make it so only by working through it, not by ignoring it or abandoning it.

So, how are we supposed to actually "do" this reflecting, this seemingly unpleasant month of repenting? Most *siddurim* (prayerbooks) provide us a beginning with the more traditional prayers. Reflecting on our behavior and our general attitude to life are important parts, too. In the end, though, thought and prayer are not enough. We must make a sincere attempt to alter our behavior. I encourage you to seek out those whom you might have neglected (or who feel you have) in the last year and ask for their understanding and love while offering your own. You'd be surprised how, just by itself, this act of openness can heal a future.

The final work is done in looking honestly at our own deep-seated attitudes; how we see the world and our role within it affects every aspect of our lives. We all know this already, but perhaps it bears repeating: When we say something enough, whether true or false, we will begin to believe it and it rules our mind. Elul is about the exact opposite methodology: We cannot “revision our future” if we are stuck in our past. Essentially, we cannot brighten our future if we allow the path ahead to be covered with brush and weeds. Now is the time for tending our garden. Now is the time to help our own harvest become a rich one.

As your Rabbi, I challenge you to remember both the humor and the depth of this season through this vignette: When a Rabbi asked his most senior congregant why he didn't come to shul anymore, the man replied, “Rabbi, when I turned 95 I expected God to take me at any time. Then when I turned 100, then 105, well, I figured that God was busy and I didn't want to be a bother.” Reflecting and repenting during Elul is not a bother, it is what will make your life more full and happy in the coming year.

May your reflection be a truly invigorating one and, if you happen to be perfect, may you be generous as well to help out a fellow Jew be more like you!

© Rabbi Gerald R. Fox