

Early August 2010

Dear Friends,

Today is the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul - (as well as the beginning of Ramadan for our Muslim cousins). This entire month is set aside for us to do the work necessary to come in to the High Holy Days in touch with our inner selves. The classic way to do the work necessary is to reflect on the year gone by and where we have fallen short. The extending of apologies to those we have hurt in some way, either intentionally or not, is at the core of modern day Elul reflection and repentance. The more difficult task is the ephemeral one - the need to repent for "sins" against God.

This is the place where many of us fall short. It is relatively easy to request forgiveness from our friends. It is relatively easy to remember when you have hurt someone or ignored someone or damaged someone in some way. I have one friend who extends an apology to all the people she may have hurt, either intentionally or not. Each year, when her apology arrives in my inbox, I have the religious obligation to respond. I feel the urge to forgive her unknown hurt immediately. Although we share this process electronically, the interaction is always special. I am touched and reminded of the true intent of the season.

One of the practical beauties of the "sins against people" process is the acknowledgement that some people may not accept our apology. Our obligation then is to apologize three times, and if the apology is not accepted, we're off the hook. It's harder to get an acceptance of our apologies to God or whatever we call that transcendent and spiritual focus of our lives. God's forgiveness, whether literal or metaphorical, is hard to hear and/or feel. We cannot just say, "Hey, God, if I've let you down somehow, please accept my apology." That's far too easy and not at all the intention of this most important time in our spiritual year. If we reject the idea of an anthropomorphic God, then the entire process takes on a far more complex intent. What does it mean to "sin against God" in this age of unending wars and ecological disasters? We can know the answer if we take the time.

Judaism uses the image of an arrow missing the mark to help us identify our sins. Our intention is to hit the center of the target - the place where living rightly is located. However, reality forces us to admit that we often fall short. These sins against God, which can only be internally forgiven, are most often the reflections of our failure of intent. This is simply because to be in touch with those failures we must each understand the target we created. Each of us have both shared and unique targets.

Our shared targets are often identified in the High Holy Day liturgy. We have litanies filled with them, both in modern and in ancient terms. From the sins of failing to acknowledge the Power that Makes for Salvation to the sins of failing to care for the needy, we are reminded that aspiring to "hit the mark" is not an easy task. We look within to find these failures - not without. We remember our goals from last year and see through open eyes where we have fallen short. We must seek teshuvah - the turning to the right path, with our whole selves. Our intention must be clear.

We are given the whole month of Elul to prepare for this return to the right path. We can journal where we wish to hit/find our mark. We can reflect, we can meditate, we can pray and we can examine as we each approach the metaphorical judgment that is completed at the end of Yom Kippur. We no longer imagine a book of our failures and some old man checking off the sincerity of our repentance. The ultimate assessment is done within and its truth is for us to own.

I want to share with you a poem from Debbie Perlman from her amazing book *Flames to Heaven*. It is called :

Psalm 94: Rosh Chodesh Elul

Fighting the languor of sultry days,
We begin the turning, back to You;
Moving against the heat of our hearts,
Against the anger inside, we turn.

Call us to begin the examination, Healing God;
Call for us to remove the garment of our deceit,
The fears that bind us away from You,
Chaffing at our tender miseries.

In the month of Elul, we begin the unlayering,
Peeling piece by piece the accumulated detritus,
Shaking it free, holding it to the hot light
To scrutinize as the year begins its ending.

In the month of Elul, we uncover our secrets,
Examining them with a truthful heart,
Counting the pulse beats of our life,
The selfish pressures we apply and resist.

Call us to the consultation of our souls,
For You are a God of healing and mercy;
Call us to being without delay,
That Elul might draw us near to You.

The holy season, which we approach with both joy and trepidation, allows us to look within and find our own path. Each of us succeeds and fails throughout the year. Celebrate your successes and find forgiveness through honesty and an open heart. We all fall short. We all can find the targets we missed. We all can do better. We know that...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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