

Early September 2010

Dear friends,

We are in the midst of the Days of Awe... the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is our time for self-reflection and returning to the path of holiness that we so often misplace during the course of the year. It's hard to stay focused on how we live our internal lives. So much happens on the "outside" that we easily lose track of the "inside"... in fact, for many of us, the inside is not a part of our conscious selves at all.

It's hard to be self-reflective and then do something about it. It's hard to look back on the year and see where we've fallen short - not by some abstract standard, but by our own. We don't need to set up guidelines for living a life that is on target... we know, for ourselves, what our targets should be. If we take this time seriously - take this time in the context of the lives we live in the 21st century - then the relevance of the High Holy Days can work for us. Unfortunately, most of us, even when we attend services and fast on Yom Kippur, don't do the real work of this season.

These are days that are private. We don't need to know the changed melody of the Shema or the call of the Shofar service to feel the power within. We don't need to buy new clothes or try and remember the names of fellow congregants we may not have seen since last year at this time. We stand (and sit and stand) in community but our internal selves are on the line - and no one knows what is going on inside except ourselves. We know, if we spend the time, if we have lived a life that has merit. We know where we have fallen short. Most importantly, we know if we have tried to do better.

Our prayers in community at this time of year are almost all in the plural. We have sinned, we have fallen short, we have been covetous, we have failed to do good... We pray collectively because we can easily forget our own missteps, and so together we run through the list of possibly shared failures and it allows us to feel a little less guilty. If "we" have fallen short we come to realize that we all fall short. We are not the only person who has perhaps ignored obligations to others. We are not the only person who has not returned kindnesses given to us by others. We are not alone in missing the mark.

Communal confession is cleansing. Communal confession attempts to cover all the bases for us so that when the sun sets on Saturday night and the gates of redemption start to close, we are supposed to feel a sense of completion as well as a sense of return. We become reborn. We are supposed to have done the work, made our apologies, repaired what needed repairing and begin again. The times we have fallen short this past year are put behind us and a new year, a year when we hope to be more on target, begins.

But we can't forget that we are also being judged during this time. Even though few of us still believe that an ancient bearded man with a big ledger containing our failures is checking off successful atonement, the idea of judgment fills these Holy Days. Today, the judge is more likely our own conscience than the big old guy in the sky - but judgment must be part of these Days of Awe as well as awareness. It's relatively easy to

reflect on the pain we may have inflicted on others, whether consciously or unconsciously. That awareness makes repair more possible. It is much harder to pass judgment on what are called sins against God. These are the internal sins... these are the sins that can't be resolved with a simple "I'm sorry." These are the sins of failing to act when we know action is required. These are the sins of ignoring the things that make us human, make us compassionate, make us loving and honorable. These are the sins we find within ourselves and we alone can repair. These are the sins that require us to change.

I will close with a wonderful meditation from a High Holy Day *machzor* (the Hebrew name of a prayer book for the Days of Awe) that I discovered years ago but is no longer in print. Because of that I have no way to honor the author. I apologize and thank the community that gifted us with these words, Temple Sinai of the Desert:

WE CAN CHANGE

No sin is too great for God to pardon, but none too small for habit to magnify. To anyone who asserts, "Human nature never changes," it is fair to reply, "It is human nature to change itself."

God made us changers. We can change ourselves into fish and dive deep and stay under water unafraid of any sea animals.

We can change ourselves into birds and travel farther with heavier cargo, wider wings, fiercer claws and beaks than any bird.

God must have wanted us to be changers; else God wouldn't have put that awful unrest in us.

May you find the change that works...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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