

Fragile and Strong

What is stronger than steel and weaker than paper? Sounds like a riddle, but it is a simple reflection I shared with someone in a recent pastoral visit. The answer is obvious: We are. Each of us can steel ourselves against the worst that Life has to offer and yet we can crumble very easily, under the right conditions. We view ourselves as an unrealistic mirage if we assume simply one or the other vision – that we are only strong or only weak. We are complex and our religious traditions recognize and celebrate this fact.

As the unmitigated joy of the New Year fades and even the ominously solemn tone of Yom Kippur becomes an echo in our psyche, what are we left with? What is the “take away” message for the coming year? Obviously, the details are different for each of us, but the long view is most definitely universal: Each of us must live better, embracing a more healthy, more full life than the year before. Judaism is not about stagnation, it is about transformation.

While Judaism expresses what we might call universal or eternal truths, our heritage uses and has always used the language of transformation. Whether it is Passover's message of a people's birth, Hanukkah's message of rebirth, or Shavuot's retelling of the Jewish People's acceptance of God's laws, to name just a few, Judaism speaks its religious language of transformation in constantly loud tones.

The *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe) reflect this metaphor in the most extreme and personal way. We perform a personal inventory during the preceding month of Elul and then experience the happiness of the New Year, which leads us into the direct engagement with God and with ourselves on Yom Kippur. Then what? We are stripped bare, exposing our deficiencies and for what purpose? To feel uncomfortable? To give God a chuckle? To keep us under God's “thumb?” No. To allow us to make brand new choices in who we will be from that moment forward.

Our tradition reminds us at this time of year that, while God is above us in the “food chain,” we are responsible for ourselves. We are directed to make that overarching decision to move forward with our lives – to shed our lives of pettiness, to excise from our mind the illness of foul-thinking, to work toward a real understanding of our fellow, *to grow into ourselves* – in order to move our spirit to a higher place (to borrow from *Chasidische* theology). This “higher place” is a way of living, a way of being a Jew and a human being, that requires all of the best we have to offer and promises the same.

What is inherent in our heritage's *Yamim Noriam* promise is that each of us will benefit from seeing the world differently and from living in it differently. This is a proven fact: We cannot predict who will meet with tragedy (or what kind of tragedy – small or large) in the coming year, but we can constantly manage and adjust to what Life has to offer us. In the end, we have only one life and one world in which we can live; we must live in the present and live wholly and well. The time is now and the choice is up to you.

I offer you now my blessing for the *Yamim Noraim*: May your journey be uplifting and bring you to the life of which you feel you can only dream.

G'mar Hatima Tovah and *Hag Sameach* (for Sukkot),
Rabbi Gerald R. Fox