

Rabbi Fox's Message for Temple Beth Shalom's
Elul 5768 (September 2008) Newsletter

Precious Moments Without Regrets

If we ask ourselves, alone and in a quiet moment, what is our greatest wish, our greatest desire that could not be fulfilled, it would almost certainly be to interact with someone long gone. In particular, when people are asked what they regret in life, their answers invariably involve not communicating clearly, or at all, the love and importance of those close to them. I see this all the time in my life as a chaplain, visiting patients in hospitals and nursing home residents – everyone wishes that they had said “I love you” more and had been more free with the simple words, “I’m sorry.”

What pains most human beings is not being “wrong” but rather not having an opportunity to become “right.” It is my theory that while Judaism emphasizes that “benching Gomel” – reciting the prayer after a dangerous or near-death experience – is about accepting the gift of life that God has granted us, it is much more about being thankful for being granted the ability to become the best we can be. I have spoken to you many times, in newsletter articles, in sermons, and in private conversations, about striving to become the unrealized self that each of us can achieve. We are, to put it mildly, works in progress. It is our ignorance of this fact that allows us to be nasty to others, to ignore the love we receive, and to accept broodingly the stagnation in our lives.

As so we come to the month of Elul, the traditional time of soul-seeking and forgiveness-seeking. It is at this time of year that we are commanded to think of ourselves, but not selfishly so. We seek to be honest with ourselves in order to know the work ahead; during Elul, we do not seek self-happiness, instead we seek self-awareness. It has been commonly said that you cannot change what you do not acknowledge and that is just what the month of Elul seeks to teach us . . . to teach us about ourselves.

As we look at the tragedies that befall those less fortunate than us in the world, we must ask ourselves the age-old question: Why are we granted such a rich life? Why am I here? One of our greatest sages, Hillel, famously asked the tripartite question: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” Each of our lives, despite the sometimes considerable challenges we face, is awash with great opportunities to make the world a better place. I know that, by and large, we are good people, that we have sacrificed for family, friends, and even strangers. I wonder, however, what each of us will regret when we no longer have an opportunity available to us to heal ourselves, those who we love, or even someone in need who crosses our path. What will you regret next year? Let's not find out . . . let us let loose the best of who we are inside to become today what we could be tomorrow.

As we consider these big questions over the coming weeks, I ask you not to live another day for who you are but to live every day for who you could be.

May you be enriched by this season of introspection, forgiveness, and celebration that is the gateway to your bright tomorrows. And, of course, Sarah and I offer you every blessing for the New Year for yourself and your loved ones.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu,

Rabbi Gerald R. Fox

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