

**ROSH HASHANAH  
FIRST DAY  
5769**

**If someone asked you what the purpose of your life is and you were to answer as honestly as possible, what would you say? What would you say to your child, grandchild or spouse? What would you say to a friend or your rabbi? How would you answer this question when you ask it of yourself? Someone said that there are two important days in every person's life: the day you were born and the day when you figure out why you were born.**

**The late Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, a former president of the Rabbinical Assembly, maintained that one cannot be a good Jew if one does not really think as a Jew. He emphasized that it is not thinking about synagogue or Israel, but about fundamental Jewish values and principles that determine how we live our lives and respond to life as Jews.**

**Rabbi Waxman taught that there is one and only one purpose of being alive: Tikkun Olam—making the Jewish people and the entire world a better place to live. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that Judaism contains mysteries, but its ultimate purpose is not mysterious at all. It is to honor the image of G-d in other people—all people, not just those who are like us—and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence. Chauvinism, fear, prejudice and selfishness must not prevent us from fulfilling this responsibility.**

**Leonard Fein, the founder of Moment magazine and Mazon, points out that with all the differences between Jews there is one core idea that defines us and perhaps could bring us together and make us one people. To be a Jew is to know, fundamentally, that this world is not working the way it was meant to, or the way it is supposed to work. It is badly broken. We are all in exile wherever we live—Jerusalem, Paris or Cincinnati—and we are all implicated in the world's repair.**

**I participated in a special meeting on Capital Hill last winter where the executive director of AIPAC, Howard Kohr, spoke. Howard Kohr clearly stated in front of over 200 Conservative rabbis that Jews are going to have to find Jewish concerns other than Israel to decide for whom to vote. He said that Israel is not a concern for Jews in this election.**

**There should be no difference among Jews regardless of denomination, locale, political affiliation or anything else as to what should and should not be going on at the Agriprocessor meat packing plant in Iowa. There should be no difference among Jews as to the evil of war and the mitzvah of pursuing peace. There should be no difference among Jews as to the mitzvah of taking care of the poor and disenfranchised, providing health care and education for all in need, caring for the environment and protecting civil liberties and human rights for everyone. Recently I had lunch with a congregant who shared, with tears in his eyes, how selfish and**

uncaring he thinks we have become. Jews living by Jewish values are generous and very caring.

Not every Jew's vote is a Jewish vote. No Jew should ever vote based on personal comfort, convenience and certainly not money. Jews who do so are wrong because by doing so we are not fulfilling the one and only reason we are alive: Tikkun Olam. Jewish values as Rabbi Waxman, Leonard Fein and so many others remind us insist that we should live—and that would include voting—committed to making both the Jewish people and the entire world a better place to live. This is the criterion that determines whether a vote is a Jewish vote or not.

On Rosh Hashanah four years ago, I dedicated my sermon to what constitutes a Jewish vote. I never mentioned, as I never do, a candidate or a party yet numerous congregants were saying that I endorsed a particular candidate. Whether we are voting for a school levy or for a state senator, for a bill to take better care of the aged and mentally ill or for the president, our votes should be determined by what Jewish teachings and ethics tell us. What I said four years ago I repeat today, Jewish values determine whether a vote is a Jewish vote. I cannot help it if after hearing these principles, concerns and values one concludes on one's own that they describe a particular candidate. That would seem to force the question.

Jews are to strive to live as thermostats and not thermometers. Too many of us do not contribute to change, to positive transformation, to Tikkun Olam. Our lives too often reflect the state of affairs that exists in our broken world. We simply indicate the temperature as compared to adjusting the temperature to what it needs to be by how we live our lives.

Judaism compels us to weigh in on the global drama and not to be apathetic and insular. We are commanded to be not only a presence in the world but to be a compassionate presence. We are to care not only about ourselves and our own; we are to care about others and our world. Jews who only care about Jews are wrong. Jews who care about Jews and all people fulfill the mitzvah of loving your neighbor as yourself. Jews who only care about Israel are wrong. Jews who care deeply about Israel and the rest of the world are fulfilling this mitzvah as our ancestors did when they brought sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem on behalf of the Jewish people and all the nations of the world. At Seder a few years ago, a guest asked: "When did Jews quit caring about other people's children? When did Jews start caring only about themselves?"

We are all at our best when we think of the well-being of others and at our worst when think only of or too much of our own well-being. Professor Ruth Wise of Harvard asserts that one of the most important reasons that Jews were able to survive all of the centuries living among non-Jews—often in hostile conditions—was because of the internalized values of personal accountability and respect for the dignity of all life. In other words, it was our operative value system, especially our humanism and respect for all life, that account for our surviving and thriving.

Rabbi Shmuel Lewis reminds us that that the transgression of sinful meditations of our heart, "hirhur halev," that is part of the Yom Kippur "Al Heyt" confession describes when we reinforce those ways of seeing in which my own self is at the center, where my own needs distort my vision of others and their needs. The sin of "hirhur halev" involves my own views keeping me from even considering a view that may move me off center, move me from my comfort zone so that I will be able to do more as compare to less Tikkun Olam. Narcissism means we are primarily concerned with ourselves but if we truly care about ourselves and our children, we would not be narcissistic. A classic "Catch 22."

Rav Kook taught that whenever possible, other than when safety is a concern, we should pray in a room with windows. We are commanded to weigh in on the global drama. How can we hope to do this if we cannot see the world outside with all its people and all its needs? How can we be a compassionate presence in the world if we are not wide-eyed open to all the pain and suffering in the world?

A Hasidic rabbi taught that G-d will not live among people who cannot or will not live with each other. In Randy Cohen's "The Ethicist" in the New York Times magazine, a community leader of a small town asks if it is ethical for a group of citizens who personally funded the purchase of a fire truck to withhold its services when needed by one of the citizens who did not support and contribute to the project. His answer was no. It is not ethical to withhold help from those who want the benefits of the fire truck but none of the responsibility. There is an ethic for a community that dictates right behavior even in response to those who are not behaving correctly. How many of us agree? How many would let those people's homes burn down?

Religion, we are reminded, is to be a countervailing force to and not a replica of society. What is truly religious is that which changes individuals so that they then can transform the world for good. Righteous and right religion often must challenge and shake things up to help us fulfill our one and only purpose: Tikkun Olam. Think of the earliest example of Judaism doing just this: the defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. This was a religious revolution for human rights and freedom that gave birth to the Jewish people. Jewish commitment to universal human rights is rooted in our origins. A Jew who does not understand this does not understand the purpose of being a Jew.

Jay Michaelson, a writer in the Forward, raises the question as to what are Jewish issues? He says that Jewish issues are issues of values, ethics, morality. He points out that Christian groups bring their religious issues to politics. Jews, he observes, bring their political issue of Israel and their personal economic and financial issues. Michaelson, acknowledging how extremely objectionable many of these religious groups and their values are, nevertheless insists that Jews have to learn from them and begin bringing our religious issues as defined by our religious values and principles to politics.

For Conservative Jews it would include human rights, environmental issues, peace and war issues, Darfur, women's rights, immigrant and racism issues, issues of economic justice, issues of greed and corruption in the marketplace and in our financial institutions and corporations, and gay right issues, health care concerns and more. Michaelson argues that not every Jew's vote is a Jewish vote. He reminds us that our Jewish values speak to real problems of the world and the world's future. A Jewish vote, Rabbi Waxman would insist is—short and simple—a vote that contributes to Tikkun Olam.

With all the religious fundamentalists and their apocalyptic, messianic and literalist views of the world's redemption and the end of days, we need to reaffirm on this Rosh HaShanah when we celebrate the creation of humanity our commitment to improving and fixing our world by virtue of how we live our lives every day. The healing and repair of our world is not going to take place by studying mystical texts, searching for kabbalistic codes or by an all out war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness. This improvement to our world will only happen by our personal commitment to not only know the day we were born but to understand why we were born and to live accordingly. Obviously, we are free to ignore this all together. Human history testifies to how many have done this in the past and what we have done up until now. What we do not know is what history will record about us beginning now.

Leonard Fein in talking about Jews being able to unite around the core value of Tikkun Olam points out that you do not have to be Jewish to like Levy's rye bread or to do Tikkun Olam. Fein observes that given how few Jews there are that this is a good thing both for the Levy bread company and for the world. Father John Cusick, a Catholic priest, responding to questions as to why bad things happen to innocent people reminds us that faith is an action issue, not a philosophical musing. Having faith is doing something about our broken world. Father Cusick tells us that what human beings do about human tragedy says more about how much or how little G-d is in our lives than anything else. Rabbi David Wolpe tells us that we must know that each of our souls matters but it is worthless if it does not help us make G-d's world a better place.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that living a life of purpose and meaning means that we know that we made a difference: that we brought a moment of grace or justice or kindness to the world that would not have happened had it not been for us. This is as close as we can get to the meaningfulness of life. This is close as we can get to holiness.

Someone said: "Sometime I would like to ask G-d why G-d allows poverty, famine and injustice when G-d could do something about it. 'Well,' I was asked, 'why don't you ask G-d?' Because I am afraid that G-d might ask me the same question." So, if we were asked this question on this Rosh HaShanah, and we would answer honestly, what would our answer be?

## SHANAH TOVAH