

ROSH HASHANAH
FIRST DAY
5771

George Burns once explained that the secret of a good sermon is to have a really good beginning and a really good ending.....and to have these really as close together as possible. Why is it such hard work for rabbis to do this? I do not know.

At the very beginning of Pirke Avot, Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik teaches that the entire world endures because of three things: Torah, work and deeds of kindness, *gemilut hasadim*. The Hebrew for work, *avodah*, is the word used to describe the labor required in the Temple; everything from cutting wood and cleaning out the ashes to the singing of the Levites and the prayers of the priests. Everything was work, *avodah*, and it was all to serve one purpose: to bring Heaven down to earth and human beings closer to G-d.

After the destruction of the Temple, this word, *avodah*, came to refer to spiritual work including prayer. In English idiom we speak of self-work and inner work. In Hebrew we speak of *tikkun atzmi*, the fixing or improving of oneself. Rabbi Tarfon, in Pirke Avot, reminds us that we are not responsible to finish this work—no one can—but we are responsible to be actively engaged in it.

The Talmud tells us if we meet someone who says: “I have made great spiritual progress with very little effort,” we are not to believe this person. Similarly, if we meet someone who says: “I have been working and working to grow spiritually and I have not accomplished anything,” we are not to believe this person either. Our tradition insists that everyone—be it Tevye the milkman or Baron Rothchild, the simple shepherd boy or Albert Einstein—can grow spiritually; each person in accord with one’s essence, one’s *neshamah*.

The special work of this season is that of *teshuvah* and *cheshbon nefesh*: looking at our lives honestly, deeply and thoroughly. This work is difficult; anyone engaged in it knows how hard it is. The Seer of Lublin, a 19th century Hasidic rabbi, taught his followers that as difficult as it is to improve ourselves, it is even more difficult to look at ourselves in the way we must if indeed we are to improve. All of this is considered to be holy work, *avodah kedoshah*. Like everything holy—marriage, parenting, teaching, studying, tzedakah, Shabbat, Israel—it requires our focus, prioritization, dedication and effort.

A debate exists as to the purpose of the High Holy Days. Is it to be sure that everyone feels good when leaving services or are we to leave feeling challenged, aware of what we need to improve upon and encouraged to do this work? As we have reflected before, in the spirit of Rabbi Heschel, are we able to move out of our comfort zones and be receptive to having our positions and perspectives challenged? Are we able to examine ourselves, our life styles and our priorities?

We are reminded that these days are called Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*. They are not called Days of Self Affirmation or Days of Self-Endorsement. They are Days of Awe because of the work they require of us. They are Days of Awe because they force us to appreciate the urgency of life and what is going on in our world. They are Days of Awe because they are to overwhelm us with a sense of responsibility.

Consider that Sukkot through Simchat Torah—nine days of celebration—are ours to enjoy but only after Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Our rabbis tell us that the work we do during the High Holy Days is how we earn the right to party during Sukkot. We are not to feel entitled and privileged; we are to feel responsible and obligated to work hard during these ten days to earn our good times. Is this not what we are to teach our children? That the best things in life are those that you work hard for and earn on your own.

Our rabbis teach that we should be thankful for the opportunity every year to do *teshuvah* and *cheshbon nefesh* and not regard them as regrettable burdens. We are guided and advised to be self-critical in positive, constructive and well intended ways. There is nothing praiseworthy about beating ourselves up for our shortcomings and mistakes. We should note that during our confessions on Yom Kippur, the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Heyt*, we are not to

smack our hearts, but to tap our hearts as if to wake ourselves up and reestablish a good and healthy heart beat and rhythm. When we own up to our lives, we resuscitate ourselves; when we do not, we remain asleep. When we hold the fringes of our *tallit*, our *tzitziyot*, as we tap our hearts and recite all of our sins, mistakes and shortcomings we are to remember that these are the same *tzitziyot* with which we kiss our Torah; the same *tzitziyot* that symbolize G-d's love for us.

Rabbi Simchah Bunim relates of how when once in the market he offered a certain price to a farmer for his vegetables, the farmer replied: "You can do better." From then on Rabbi Bunam always told himself: "I can do better." The Riziner, another 19th century Hasidic rabbi, described the process of self-improvement, *tikkun atzmi*, as being more difficult than breaking boulders. This is not child's play; it is, as we say, the big leagues.

Rabbi Bunim would teach his followers that when you stay at home everything is comfortable but when you leave home things can become discomforting. He explained that when we stay in our homes, when we remain in our comfort zones surrounded by people who endorse and support what we say and do, all is fine for us. But when we leave this secure zone we become vulnerable because of all the people we are exposed to who have different values, priorities and perspectives. When we see the moral and ethical accomplishments of others, their activism and altruism, their generosity and compassion, their studying and learning, we suddenly see ourselves differently and we are not as content and comfortable with ourselves as before. Rabbi Bunam would encourage his followers to always be moving out of their comfort zones thereby making themselves vulnerable. His hasidim did not come to services to feel good; they came to work on themselves which indeed, interestingly, can make us feel very good. We are advised to do this work, this *teshuvah* and *cheshbon nefesh*, not out of fear or guilt but out of love: a love of G-d, a love for others who benefit from our self-improvement and yes, a love for ourselves. What better way is there to love someone than to help someone, including ourselves, learn and grow, improve and become a better person?

What of the work of parenting, of being role models and teachers for our youth? Are we teaching them self-discipline, delayed gratification and how to distinguish between what one wants and what one needs? Are we teaching them how to admit wrong doing, own up to mistakes, take responsibility for one's actions and ask for forgiveness? Are we teaching them how to be honest and trustworthy and the importance of making their word good? Are we teaching them how to be compassionate and empathic, to be thankful for what they have and feel responsible? The work of parenting is anything but child's play; parenting is most holy work. What of our other relationships? What of our friendships and our marriages? What work is required of us to communicate, compromise and be considerate and what is necessary for our faithfulness and fidelity?

In my bar/bat mitzvah class we spend a lot of time discussing ethical and moral behavior. The Hebrew word for this is *musar*. This word comes from the same root as another Hebrew word meaning difficulty or suffering. When I ask the kids why they think the same Hebrew root gives us a word meaning suffering and a word meaning ethics they figure it out. "Rabbi," they say in response to my question, "it can be really hard to do what is right." When I ask them to think of an example, they always respond, sooner or just a little later, with the Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust. Our children are hungry for this type of education and this type of parenting. It takes a lot of work on our part to provide them with it.

I am frequently asked if every bar and mitzvah must say that he or she is going to fast on Yom Kippur. I never require this to be included in our children's speeches. I simply instruct them to not say anything they do not mean. Many do so on their own which seems to illustrate the perceived importance of fasting on Yom Kippur as part of this rite of passage and coming of age experience. Today, from studies, we know that many of our bar/bat mitzvah kids in the United States do not fast on Yom Kippur. It is work to fast and it must be taught. This is why our rabbis tell us we are to begin training our children to fast from nine years of age—a little more each year so that when they become obligated to do so, they will be prepared to do so. For us, in the midst of the plenty, affluence and abundance with which we are so blessed, fasting takes on even more significance.

Some of the most complex and challenging work for us to do as individuals and a community can be found in a recent exchange in the journal *Sh'ma* between Rabbi David Ellenson and Rabbi Sharon Brous. Each one of the

issues they raise is a subject of its own. For example: the difficulty for Jews to find the right balance between our particularism and our universalism. Some Jews do not think enough about being Jewish and the Jewish people and some Jews are too insular thinking only of being Jewish. Some Jews think we and our religion are superior and other Jews do not appreciate the uniqueness, importance and preciousness of being Jewish. Some Jews are distant and disengaged from the Jewish community and other Jews are distant and disengaged from the concerns and problems of the world and humankind. It is challenging to live by two calendars and for many of us it is hard work to have the Jewish calendar regularly influence our lives and determine our agendas. Is tomorrow, for example, Friday, September 10, 2010 or the second day of Rosh HaShanah, 5771? Is this December 31 going to be Shabbat or New Year's Eve? Actually, we can make it both.

One of the most difficult challenges for us today is to find the correct way to love and support Israel and be able to appropriately express concerns about and criticisms of Israel. It takes great effort for some Jews who are critical of Israel, as Rabbi Ellenson points out, to not only and always be critical of Israel. It is work for some of us to be sensitive, balanced and disciplined in our criticism. For many others it is difficult to love Israel and be able to accept and understand that not everything Israel does is right. It takes work for some of us not to demean fellow Jews who criticize Israel by accusing them of being anti-Israel or even calling them self-hating Jews. It takes work in the Jewish community not to censor such Jews and allow for respectful debate. If working on this—to unequivocally love Israel and be able to constructively criticize Israel and to be constructively critical of Israel and unequivocally love Israel—is not holy work, I do not know what is.

Religious pluralism demands serious effort and work. How do those of us, like the Conservative movement and Conservative Jews, who are passionately committed to pluralism deal with the issue that there are other denominations of Judaism who reject the legitimacy and authenticity of Conservative Judaism, our theology and our practice? Does religious pluralism require us to accept and support even those who reject us? How are we to confront and respond to what we consider unjust and unethical behavior done in the name of Judaism? Is it not our responsibility to address these issues? The challenges of religious pluralism certainly involve holy work; pluralism is anything but child's play.

What kind of work is required of us, in the spirit of Maimonides of the 12th century, to harmonize what we think with what traditional Judaism tells us we are to believe? How do we make sense of our prayers and practices, many of which express ideas and theology that are universes apart from how we live, how we think and how we see life and the world? How do we deal with prayers, for example, whose content is difficult if not objectionable? What is involved to learn how to interpret our prayers and their imagery so that they are personally edifying, elevating and meaningful? How can we experience our rituals and ceremonies so that they resonate deeply within us and fortify us and that we do not engage in them out of nostalgia, guilt, superstition or habit? Struggling with these issues is holy work. Anyone who will look at and study our movement's new *Machzor Lev Shalem* that just came out will see the work that has gone into this particular area of our spiritual wrestling. Theology, prayer and religious observance are anything but child's play.

What of the work required of us to find the way to have our communalism temper and contain our narcissism? What work is involved to make sense of and find meaning in being part of a historical people that prays in the common plural-always thinking of us, we and our—as we live in a sociological and cultural reality that is concerned with me, my and I? What labor is necessary to be sure that we are committed participants in our Jewish community and not simply clients; that in our synagogues we are congregants and not simply customers or consumers? This requires a lot of work on our part.

What kind of work is involved, do you think, for those of us who smoke to quit, who drink too much to work on this, who have a gambling problem to deal with it? These and other behaviors affect our health, that of others and our relationships with family and friends. This is why doing something about these is holy work. What kind of work is required for those who are abused to come forward and get help and those abusing others to do the same? Can we imagine the work involved for gay people to come out and for an African-American youth to bust out of the inner city? What work is demanded of those of us who have homophobic or racist feelings and attitudes to own up to them and get rid of them? What work is necessary for those who have been rejected and hurt to go

on loving and for those who have been lied to and cheated upon to be able to trust? And what about the hardest work of all: asking for forgiveness and forgiving?

Lewis Carol pointed out that to make reference to a crooked path we must know what a straight path looks like. All of us are smarter than we behave. We all know that we are responsible. Our Torah, using the same Hebrew verb tells us, in Genesis and then in Deuteronomy, that we have to watch out for and be guardians of our world and do the same for our own souls. Are we taking care of our souls? Is there in our lives regular prayer, meditation, reading, studying, tzedakah, art and music? Do we look up at the starry skies frequently enough and do we walk enough in the woods?

These High Holy Days, these Days of Awe, these days of looking in the mirror, these days of doing hard and holy work are for the purpose of helping us watch out for and care for our souls, our *neshamahs*, our essence. The more we take care of our souls, the more we will be able to care for others and care for our world. What can be harder work? What can be holier work?

Reb Naftali when seeing a man patrolling the grounds of an estate asked him for whom did he work. The man told him and then asked Reb Naftali for whom did he work? This question hit Reb Naftali hard and deep and led him to ask the man if he would come and work for him. The man asked what would his responsibilities be? Reb Naftali answered by telling him that his job would be simply to ask Reb Naftali everyday that very question: "For whom do you work?" Bob Dylan sings: "You got to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you got to serve somebody." Serving G-d is not an abstract construct. The work of *teshuvah*, *cheshbon nefesh* and self-improvement, *tikkun atzmi*, that these Days of Awe require of us is serving G-d as much as the Priests and the Levites did in the Temple.

We are of a wise and ancient tradition that tells us that working on ourselves can be the hardest work in the world. We are of a wise and ancient tradition that teaches us that this is the holiest work without which our world cannot endure. We are of a wise and ancient tradition that tells us that each and every one of us is not only obligated to do this work but each and every one of us is able to do it and succeed greatly.

Why is it so hard for us rabbis to follow George Burns' advice? I do not know. I will keep working on it—maybe. One thing I do know is that I pray that for all of us this year will be a year of deep, personal, positive, transformative and loving inner work done in the same spirit of the farmer in our Book of Proverbs: "I sweat and toil in the fields rejoicing and celebrating over the fruits to come, rejoicing and celebrating over the fruits to come."