

LET'S LOOK FOR A WAY OUT TOGETHER

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Every year, like clockwork, the Jewish people—even those of us who insist we're not “religious”—reemerges, reconvenes, and restores itself for the High Holy Days.

But why should this occur so predictably? What motivates so many of us to make this occasion a priority on our calendar again and again, year after year? What do we expect to find in the synagogue during these few days?

We come for as many reasons as there are individuals, of course. But notwithstanding that each of us has a somewhat unique motivation for coming to High Holy Day services, the list of reasons may not be very long: We come to work on ourselves, to work at becoming better people. We come to reaffirm our Jewish identity. We come to renew our membership in the Jewish community. We come because we want to see old friends and acquaintances. We come because someone arm-twisted or guilt-tripped us. And we come for reasons we may not really understand.

No matter what the initial motivation, most of us will spend several hours attending High Holy Day services. Since in our day-to-day life we rarely have the luxury of wasting hours in a day, maybe we should consider this time in the same light: it's valuable and not to be wasted.

How can we productively use this time, even if we're full of doubt or cynicism about the usefulness of congregational prayer, Judaism, or God?

Since both of us grew into our 40s without a Jewish education, we know personally how difficult it is to ascribe to God, Judaism, or a congregation, the power to make a difference in our day-to-day pressures and hopes.

Entering middle age we may find ourselves living with a 12-year-old's ideas of God, prayer, repentance, ritual, etc. Imagine trying in middle age to live your business or professional life, your sex life, even your avocation, or any other part of your life on what you knew at 12—but that's what many of us do.

But if we're not going to believe in childish nonsense, what are we to believe in?

While there are no simple answers, one way we can begin as adults to know God, Judaism, and congregational life is to search for and act out the highest and best parts of ourselves in a more disciplined way, based on the tradition of wisdom that has sustained our people for thousands of years. We can take the time we're going to spend in synagogue to examine ourselves, to see if we're carrying around dead parts that depress us and drag us down throughout the year, parts that cause pain

to ourselves and the people we love and care about. And we can use the time to see if Judaism offers any practical help to leave behind those parts of ourselves that are dead and destructive and to lift up the parts that are alive and loving.

Using the time this way is sometimes very difficult. Self-assessment in the harsh light of truth can be very painful.

So why do it?

Because like all investments in which gratification is deferred, *teshuvah*—turning our lives for the purpose of healing ourselves—leads to exceptional rewards, both for those we love and us. And when guided by Torah, evaluating and turning ourselves according to the attributes that our tradition ascribes to God, our pain is lessened by the goodness of realizing our highest potential.

What prevents us, then, from doing *teshuvah*?

In a word, fear. We fear not being in control. We fear admitting to ourselves that *we* are not the greatest power in our lives. We fear being judged by others with our defenses down. We fear that the realities upon which we have built our lives, the fictions we've told others and ourselves, if we don't hold onto them tightly, will destroy us somehow. We fear that we'll have to give up all the sensual pleasures in our lives. We fear admitting our fear.

Yet, ironically, we have little or no fear of God, thinking that we alone, among all creatures, can escape the consequences of our actions. Some of us reject God and Torah by rejecting childish notions of reward and punishment, that punishment is designed expressly to correct *our* bad behavior.

In this way we avoid the reality that so-called punishment is a natural result of our behavior—built into the creation—and thus as unavoidable as drowning if we jump into the deep end of the pool and fail to move our arms and legs.

How are we to overcome our fears?

The requirements for overcoming fear are always the same when the conditions of our lives demand courage. We have to act on our faith—that is, do what's right, despite our reason and experience. That's the essential definition of faith, the *doing* of what we know to be right despite reason and experience that argue for the immobilization which follows from despair, futility, and powerlessness to do good.

And we have to find others, those with whom we can ally ourselves, to do what we're called upon to do. Judaism has no expectation that as individuals we can discern the will of God and manage our lives to meet it. Throughout our lives we

require teachers and, in turn, we are obligated to teach others what we have learned. There is no more compelling purpose for the establishment of a congregational community than to support and sustain its members in their efforts to learn how to live their lives every day in faithfulness to the vision and path of Torah.

Why is it that sometimes we seem to have the needed faith and at other times we don't?

Faith is a function of hope. The more hope, the more faith. Hope grows in proportion to the possibilities we see for goodness in the world. Hope increases if we see others stand up for what is right, if we see others tell the truth, if we see others combat injustice, if we see others fight for freedom, if we see others work to make peace, and if we see others show kindness. If we see others increase goodness in the world, our hope is enlarged, and we will have the faith we need to overcome our fear.

But who are these *others*? They are none other than *us* when we choose and commit ourselves to do these things as a congregational *community*. Then we potentiate hope and faith far beyond our own personal power.

We may choose to remain alone and isolated, lacking in hope and faith, fearful of turning our lives; or we may choose to join with others, build community together, increasing our hope and faith, allowing us to overcome our fear and do the *teshuvah* necessary to change our world.

In one respect we're right not to fear God. The judgment that will be levied upon us will be a consequence, most of all, of our *communal* failure to take advantage of this precious time, which has been designed and arranged for us to turn our lives together. Mostly what we have to fear is our own failures.

Where do we start if we want to turn, if we want to forsake that which is dead within ourselves?

Somewhere, somehow, we must want to find within ourselves at least a small voice of regret. That requires some moments of silence, when we are neither talking nor listening to others, which is a legitimate function of prayer.

We can ask ourselves: What have I done this past year that was self-destructive of the goodness

in me—and do I want to choose to forsake that part of myself yet?

We can ask those we love: How have I hurt you this past year? We can listen carefully to what they tell us. And then we can take responsibility for our wrongdoing and do all within our power to make things right.

We can ask ourselves: What have I done this past year that lessened hope in my congregation and thus undermined the faith of its members—and do I want to forsake that part of myself yet?

We can choose *not* to allow the pain others have caused us to rule our lives, to define who we are and how we will react, but instead to forgive those who express a genuine regret and a desire to be reconciled.

We can support each other by joining in communal confession to sins that we, personally, have not committed, so none of us have to experience the shame of confessing our wrongdoing alone.

We can accept and support the *teshuvah* of our family, friends, and congregation members, instead of automatically pigeonholing those whom we've summed up and judged in the past.

We can affirm by how we treat other people in our congregation that all of us have the capacity to change, accepting them and ourselves as we seek to be, not as we have been.

Rabbi Hayyim of Zans, who lived in the nineteenth century, told a parable that comes to teach us about the role of congregational community in *teshuvah*:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, unable to find his way out. Suddenly he sees another man approaching him. His heart is filled with joy. "Now I'll get out of here," he thinks to himself.

When they come face to face he asks the other man, "Brother, tell me which is the way out of this forest. I've been wandering about here lost for several days."

The other man says to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either—I've also been wandering here for many days. I *can* tell you this: don't take the way I've been taking, for you'll surely stay lost. But let's look for a way out together."

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