

Judaism emphasizes the power of the written and spoken word. "Timely speech is like golden apples in silver settings" (Proverbs 25:11). "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." (Proverbs 16:24).

With this positive endorsement of timely and helpful words in mind, I will devote today's article to a review of the main ideas I expressed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I hope to reinforce, for myself, and for readers, the values and actions which will guide us throughout the new year.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke of the importance of nurturing a robust Jewish identity that embraces strong, unapologetic support of Israel. Israel, thank God, is emerging from the atrocities of the Simchat Torah massacres of 5784 as a regional superpower. The determined and courageous spirit of Israeli Jews is gaining respect among sections of the Arab world even as many Western countries succumb to extremists who condemn and castigate Israel daily. By learning much more about how the vast majority of our brothers and sisters in Israel think and act, we can begin the process of jettisoning the Galut (exilic) and apologetic mentality and practice that has necessarily characterized our history. But our adaptations to living in host countries must not define how we expect Israeli Jews to live.

I spoke also of several reasons that keep us from developing a stronger relationship with God. Arrogance, guilt, rationalizing, faulty thinking and our fear of losing control are the usual suspects that prevent most of us from enriching our lives with a closer connection with the Creator. Everyone has a measure of these negative forces. Now is the time to examine one's heart and mind to find them, and expose them for what they are: an impediment to spiritual growth.

On Kol Nidrei we explored one way to begin to build a closer connection with God; finding a particular meaningful Jewish practice. Remember the stories of the Cantor and the Jewish visitor to the Frankfurt synagogue, and the mother and daughter who attended the Chabad synagogue in Solon, Ohio. Three of the four struggled to keep in touch with their own souls. It was Kol Nidrei that kept them from

total assimilation, from becoming “a spoonful of sugar in hot tea”. Even the Cantor, himself, was moved by the power of a Jewish ritual. That is a vital way to recapture one’s Jewish soul. Find and fulfill Jewish rituals that keep you connected to your own soul, to the Jewish people and to God.

Remember, too, that the Kotzker Rebbe o.b.m. challenged us to ask ourselves if we have let God into our own hearts, rather than relying on something we learned decades ago, or on what “we are supposed to believe”. If we have not identified and sidelined our spiritual impediments, we will forever keep God at arms’ length. This is sad, because, too often, at the very close of their lives, people begin to feel a loss they can often neither describe nor mitigate. Rabbis have seen it many times. Don’t be one of those whose last wishes are to feel God’s reassuring presence in their lives. While it is possible to feel God’s presence even at the end, imagine the years lost where God could have been a good friend, and His words, a trusted teacher.

May we bear in mind throughout the year 5787 the guiding principles of Judaism, the refreshing air of Jewish life, and the inspirational example of our fellow Jews who make the world a better place. Once again, a Happy and Healthy year to all.

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