

BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL JEW

by Yehuda Mendelson

On Rosh Hashana, we are judged by God for the coming year; who will live, who will die, our quality of life, our health, if we will have children. Even who will win the lottery. Everything.

The Holy One, our Merciful Father, obviously wants us to emerge meritorious from Rosh Hashana's judgment. Rabbi Itzele Peterberger once baited his students, so then why doesn't He give us Yom Kippur -- The Day of Atonement -- first, before Rosh Hashana? Reb Itzele pressed his point: "First let us secure forgiveness, and then -- with our offenses wiped from the record -- then we would stand in judgment and merit a New Year."

Reb Itzele's rhetorical query hinted to a widespread misconception about the High Holy Days: We really wish that God would forego his judgment entirely. Since for some reason that is impossible, we wish that, at least, He would do something to improve the odds: at least give us Yom Kippur before Rosh Hashana!

God's judgment on Rosh Hashana, however, is not just an unwelcome ordeal we are forced to contend with, but rather the essential prerequisite for repentance and atonement. Rosh Hashana must come first, for only when man recognizes that he will face judgment does he muster the wherewithal to raise himself above the mundane. Only the impending verdict blesses us with perspective and motivation.

Permit an analogy: At the end of medical school all students must pass comprehensive examinations. Imagine that a student contrived a scheme for passing the examinations without opening a book or mastering any of the course work. Even if he were to receive his degree and licenses, he would not be a doctor. He would be a fraud.

The purpose of the final examinations is to suffuse the medical school experience with an awareness of the coming judgment. Ideally, it is the very process of living each day of his medical school career in anticipation of the ultimate judgment that transforms the student into a person with the requisite knowledge to be a doctor. The looming examinations serve their primary purpose during the years of study, and -- after the daily rehearsals for judgment -- the few hours of actual testing at courses' end only confirm the gains achieved over the years.

Similarly, God judges us so that we will live a life infused with judgment. He has great expectations

of Man, and our constant awareness of those expectations sets the tone of our Jewish consciousness. Truly, the High Holy Days are not a hurdle, but a touchstone the very foundation for a proper approach to life all year. Thus, the commentator Maharil describes Rosh Hashana as the day when one must plant for the whole year. Only what a man sows on that day will sprout during the months that follow. Furthermore, he must prepare the field to receive the seeds, or else nothing but weeds will grow. Preparing the field -- that is the Jewish month of Elul directly preceding Rosh Hashana.

Appropriate preparation for the High Holy Days thereby rewards us doubly: not only will we find favor on Rosh Hashana, but we will also forge a template for our year-round Jewish responsibility.

A YARDSTICK: PROFESSIONALISM

What is the yardstick for Jewish responsibility? "If you pursue it like wealth and search for it like buried treasure, then you will comprehend the awe of Heaven and find knowledge of God," prescribed King Solomon (Proverbs 2:5). The wisest of men compared our Jewish character to the pursuit of material wealth, as if to say that spiritual success also demands a professional approach.

We must measure the seriousness of our spiritual agenda by comparing it to ambitious financial endeavors. A concise set of professional standards characterize any serious commercial venture on the corporate scene, and cavalier schemes conducted less professionally run the risk of financial ruin. Those same standards also characterize any serious spiritual endeavor.

How does a CEO (chief executive officer) approach a large-scale business venture? He closely monitors profit and loss; and he must be uncompromisingly, unflinchingly realistic. These two factors are of prime significance to any CEO... and to every Jew. Businesses exist to realize profit, and maximizing gains comprises the "business" of business. Still, no business can profit without accurately reading both the commercial environment and its own fiscal profile. A corporate chief must precisely identify unmet needs, recognize efficient paths for providing the required goods or services, note when conditions change; and he must know his company's financial strengths and limitations.

This sort of detailed profit tracking, environmental analysis, and accounting, demands constant attentiveness and continual evaluation. A responsible corporation head does not just peruse the daily business headlines. He monitors the critical statistics, searching for hints of profit and warnings of loss. He works the numbers over and over, calculates all possible permutations, plans for any eventuality, and looks for that fleeting opportunity to seize success.

CEOs also rarely work in total isolation. They often contract consultants to assist in many phases of the data collection, analysis and forecasting. They also spare no effort in their preparation, and engage tirelessly in preparations for preparation, etc. They theoretically launch every stage of a projected venture numerous times before daring to risk any loss.

And last, and possibly most important, people who are serious about success are tenacious. They launch more than just a venture; they launch an establishment. So they commit fixed hours to their endeavor and maintain that commitment at almost any cost. By working occasionally -- only when it is convenient -- the amateur reveals his capriciousness. He reveals that he doesn't really care about success.

Do we apply these obvious standards of commercial seriousness to our own attempts at Jewish spiritual growth? Most of us would have to admit that whatever efforts we do make to develop spiritually lack all signs of professionalism. We are amateur Jews, and therefore run the risk of slipping into spiritual bankruptcy. How will we defend ourselves on Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment? Whom do we hope to fool?

At the very least, let us consider how we might professionalize our approach to the High Holy Days; perhaps that will serve as one step toward transforming us into "professional" Jews. Let us analyze how to incorporate preparation, evaluation, and consultation, into this year's Rosh Hashana.

PREPARATION

Although even local projects require preparation, the potentially greater risks of international business demand correspondingly more elaborate preparations. How much more effort should we pour into the inter-worldly business of the High Holy Days, on which our future, both in this world and the world to come, depends.

Simply studying the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers with a comprehensive commentary constitutes perhaps the best general preparation. Reviewing the material and grappling with its related concepts in advance will not only enable us to pray with deeper comprehension and intention when the time comes.

Not only our hours of prayer spent on Rosh Hashana, but the entire two-day duration of Rosh Hashana also needs special attention. "Yom Hazikaron" literally means "the Day of Remembrance." God judges our whole day, not just our prayers. Thus, the Sages even advise us to utilize our meal times to focus on the judgment aspects of the day, eating specific foods as portents of a favorable verdict.

Furthermore, our conduct should reflect the gravity of the day -- for example, the 20th century sage, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, cautions us to avoid anger on Rosh Hashana. We should carefully plan in advance to fill the two days with Torah study and good deeds, as befitting a period illuminated with the aura of personally hosting the kingship of God.

EVALUATION

An integral part of our Jewish tradition is the reward we receive for fulfilling the mitzvot, and the punishment for their transgression. Consequently, before Rosh Hashana, we must clarify where we stand in the balance of mitzvot and transgressions. This is a two-step process. First we must attempt

to recognize God's expectations, in their entirety, and then we must discover where we have excelled and where we have floundered. This constitutes part of the art known as "cheshbon hanefesh" (spiritual accounting).

Tragically, we are not accustomed to evaluating our spiritual endeavors in a painstaking, professional manner. Can anyone accurately report on how his current spiritual profile differs from that of five years ago? Can anyone detail his latest spiritual achievement or failure, and identify its root cause? Do people notice which behaviors and environmental factors influence their relationship with God? One cannot understand Judaism nor grow spiritually without such proper evaluation.

In the short time available, we must take stock. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter long ago proposed how this can be done quickly: We should review the chapter, "The Third Gate" in the book, Gates of Repentance (Shaarei Teshuva) by Rabbeinu Yonah. This treatise is a brief recounting of the gamut of Jewish obligations -- and we should linger in those areas most relevant to our lives. We should try to walk away with a more objective picture of our mitzvah observance, clarify those laws about which we are in doubt, and invest time planning how we can enhance our future performance. This year let us not delay our soul-searching until Yom Kippur when whatever regret we actually arouse within ourselves will probably have little practical impact on our lives... and on our verdicts.

CONSULTATION

Just as corporation heads do not hesitate to contract consultants, so too must we be willing to approach incisive spiritual advisers, counselors who can peel back the obfuscation and reveal ourselves to us. Alone, we cannot heal our souls -- not even by studying the relevant texts and applying the pertinent principles -- because spiritual healing, like physical medicine, belongs to the applied sciences. Medical students master only the theoretical basis of medicine by studying texts; later they ascend to professional status by standing by the side of veteran practitioners for months or years after graduation.

In this spirit, Maimonides warns:

"How does one heal his soul? One must approach the Sages -- those who have spiritual insight. He must then heal his own soul by following these experts' advice."

To Maimonides' advice we might perhaps append the corollary: Our relationship with our consultant must be personal and intimate. The principles involved are so numerous, and the personal factors so subtle, that someone unfamiliar with our character and background can easily misguide us.

Many people needlessly neglect consultation. In every major Jewish population center there exist wise Sages, people with whom we could consult and from whose experiences we could benefit. We must rediscover these resources.

Of course, "One learns more from friends than from teachers." Just imagine the difference between someone who handles all his difficulties and decisions alone, and someone who has a friend or

group of friends with whom he confers and shares insights and advice. The benefits of such an association are four-fold:

First, even those of us with the purest intentions need encouragement, especially during personally trying periods. A group of friends can provide us with the strength we need to maintain our commitments and continue growing even through difficult times.

Second, although we have great difficulty identifying our own flaws, we are more adept at discerning those of our friends. If we were to get together occasionally with trusted companions and open each other's eyes -- both to our own biases and to the faults those biases conceal -- we would benefit immeasurably.

Third, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison." Often we might even recognize our problem and still be unable to determine the solution. But a friend observing from without -- emotionally disconnected from our struggles and frustrations -- might perceive the answer and be able to offer us the perfect advice.

Fourth, and finally, conferencing with friends who value spiritual growth presents an enviable opportunity, especially to our generation. We live in times when people are capable of discussing anything -- even the most personal matters -- with anyone, without experiencing the slightest twinge of embarrassment. The only topic people shy away from discussing is spiritual growth in Judaism and how to achieve it.

This is not to say that we resist attending a lecture about our Jewish growth. That we do willingly. What we find unpleasant is seriously and productively discussing with those closest to us the state of our personal Jewish commitment, and what we can do to improve our condition. But this is precisely the sort of discussion we need to have. Especially in this generation, we must make every effort to speak with friends about God consciousness, and about finding ways to better understand Judaism.

If we start now, these discussions alone could tip the balance on the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashana. In short, the masters of ethical Jewish thought teach: "Through dangerous territory, travel only in a convoy." Today the whole world is spiritually confused. We have no choice but to find companions for the journey.

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