

# A ROSH HASHANA MESSAGE

*by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

## Holy Smokes!

Every Holiday has its particular observances. Most of them are clear and finite mitzvos and rituals. On Pesach we abstain from eating chametz. We make a Seder, drink the four cups of wine and eat matzoh. On Sukkos we take the lulav and esrog and sit in the Sukkah. But the period of the High Holidays is different. In addition to the rituals performed on Rosh Hashanah, the blowing of the shofar and the various customs of eating certain fruits, the ensuing days are replete with a variety of nuances, that seem to pop up at different hours of the day and affect us some subtly and others more overtly at varying times of the day. Morning, noon and night there are activities that keep the spirit of the holidays sustained - all the way to Yom Kippur and beyond.

Walk into the synagogue. It looks different. It is bedecked in white. The bima. The ark. The Torahs. The alarm clock rings at least a half hour earlier for slichos -- additional supplications. And that is not enough. The daily weekday prayers have insertions and acts that constantly remind us of the days of awe. Smack in the middle of the prayers, even before the shema, we open the Aron to say a verse of Psalms. The Shemoneh Esrei itself contains insertions and substitutions that refer to Hashem as King as opposed to His usual title G-d; forgetting certain of these changes can render the entire recitation of the prayer invalid! And, of course there are insertions in the tefilah that remind us about G-d's power as a Judge and Purveyor of life. The Kadish is altered with seemingly subtle amendments that bear the weight of fundamental change.

Our foods are different as well. We abstain from tart and sour substances, replacing acidic foods with sweet ones. Those of us who are less stringent with eating bread baked by gentiles during the rest of the year are told that they should only eat bread baked by Jewish bakers. And though I can understand the reasons for these insertions and nuances, I often wondered: What is the objective of these insertions? Will they change our attitude toward life. Will they accomplish more than the prayers and tears and the shofar blasts of Rosh Hashanah and fasting and praying all day on Yom Kippur?

*In the mid 1920s a chasid once approached the Imrei Emes, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger: "Rebbe, I am traveling to Paris on a ten day business trip. Would the Rebbe give me a bracha (blessing) that I be successful in my venture?"*

After a warm blessing the Rebbe continued to make his own request. "In Paris they sell an exclusive cigar brand that is reputed to be the best in all of Western Europe. I would appreciate if you would find that brand and bring me back a box."

The chasid was puzzled by the request, but responded enthusiastically.

"Of course, Rebbe! No problem. I will find out which is the best brand in all of France and bring you back two boxes!"

The men went on his trip and indeed returned two weeks later. He visited the Rebbe to thank him for his blessing.

"Do you have the cigars?" asked the Rebbe.

The man blushed. "Rebbe, you have to forgive me. When I was in Paris, I was so immersed in business that I totally forgot about your request. But do not worry. On the way back I made a special stop in Belgium and got you the best Belgium cigar available. I was assured that it is of equal quality to the French cigar if not better!"

The Rebbe shook his head. "My dear chasid, I did not need cigars. The reason I asked you to get me the cigars while you were in France is because I wanted those cigars to be on your mind. In that manner you would remember during your stay there that you have a Rebbe."

Of course each one varying nuances may represent an important symbolism and each insertion of prayer or change of language may offer a powerful supplication, but I believe that there is something more. During these days we must keep on inserting tiny wake up calls that shout to us, "Remember the rebbe!"

Switching words, opening the Aron Kodesh, watching our foods all may be minor acts but in the greater view they are reminders that we are living in a very spiritual and holy period and the King is waiting for us to remember him.

We live in a world that is fraught with distraction. We become immersed in our mundane world and often forget about the greater spiritual picture. During the ten days of penitence it is so important to have subtle roadblocks inserted in the daily rote of our mundane lives and even in the middle of our spiritual ones. We have to insert an extra booster of spirituality in all that we do. Because during this period we have to ensure that even the search for the perfect cigar is indeed the quest for a holy smoke. *Happy and Healthy Sweet New Year ©2009 Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

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