HAPPY NEW YEAR!

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"Happy New Year" is not really an expression found in the Jewish lexicon. It may be readily found on the English language Jewish New Year's cards that we all receive - and it is certainly an expression we are used to hearing in early January. But the traditional Jewish statement of good wishes is "Kesiva v'chasima tova" - May you be inscribed and sealed for good. There is the recognition that with the passing of Elul, the final month of the Jewish year that was dedicated to introspection and spiritual growth, the Judgment Day is finally upon us. Today is the day when every Jew's lot for the coming year - life or death, wealth or poverty - is determined and written by G-d.

So begins the Ten Days of Repentance, a final push to "get our act together" and redouble our efforts to incorporate a G-d consciousness into our daily pursuits. The theme of the liturgy is G-d's role as King of the Universe. As our King and Creator (and Father), His role is that of absolute judge of all creation, the One before whom all secrets are known and nothing is hidden. Awesome? Yes. Somber? Likely. Happy? Not usually the first thought that comes to mind.

But if we really contemplate the opportunity Rosh HaShanah presents us, maybe "happy" should be our first choice.

The Jewish concept of "teshuva" (literally, return, i.e. to Torah observance) is classically translated as "repentance". Maimonides explains that there are three main components to true teshuva: regret for having committed the wrong, verbal confession (to G-d), and genuine resolve not to repeat the behavior. Michtav Me'Eliyahu (collected writings and discourses of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954) of London and B'nai Brak, one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement) discusses the immensity of the concept of "regret". The more we delve into the prospect of establishing and deepening a relationship with G-d - the lone force in the universe that is absolutely infinite, omnipotent and eternal - the greater the realization of the import of mitzvos (Divine commandments) and the imperative to capitalize on the opportunity they provide to foster that relationship. Simultaneously comes the recognition that a "sin" is not simply some detached "strike" on some heavenly scoreboard...it is a lost chance to build that bond. "Regret" is the appreciation of our own missed spiritual connection: "If I had known yesterday what I know today, imagine how much more I could have accomplished!" When this awakening so overwhelmingly impacts us to actually cause a change of behavior, it is known as "teshuva out of fear", because it is borne from the fear of damage that may have been done to our relationship with G-d because of past lapses. Thus, in light of our new mindset, these past lapses are removed from the realm of

"intentional sins" and are reduced to "errors".

As the process progresses, continues Rabbi Dessler, our appreciation of G-d's great love and kindness matures. We understand that G-d "reaches out" to us as we are mired in the muck of our misdirection and actively helps and works with us to fortify the relationship. And the more we contemplate the lost opportunities of the past, and, therefore, the bright prospect for the future, the more intensely we feel love and gratitude for having been reached out to. Only the "ba'alei teshuva" (masters of teshuva) can fathom the magnitude of G-d's "chessed" (loving kindness) in this exercise. And the more we consider it, the more it grows. Eventually we reach "teshuva out of love", one of the most intense teshuva experiences one can have. Since the sins of old spawned these profound realizations, these sins are now removed from the realm of "errors" and are converted from "demerits" into "merits".

This, according to Michtav Me'Eliyahu, is the springboard for experiencing intense joy on Rosh HaShanah. This time of forging such a reflective relationship with G-d is precisely when G-d is determining our sustenance for the coming year. The true masters of teshuva, with their unique insight into G-d's kindness, rest assured. They are fully confident that the compassionate King will grant them all that they need to assure that the coming year is not an opportunity squandered. A true cause for celebration.

The timelessness of Torah is rooted in the understanding that we do not do mitzvos because of what they do for G-d - after all, how can finite humans do anything which impacts the omnipotent G-d? We do mitzvos because of the G-d consciousness they give US. The year ahead is full of promise and potential. Let us rejoice in the special investment opportunity - a chance to invest in our own spiritual growth - granted by our loving Father.

Best wishes for a healthy and sweet New Year! Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov!

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