

GETTING REAL WITH REALITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

If you do not obey God, your God . . . that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. (Devarim 28:15)

One week until Rosh Hashanah, b"H. Are you ready? "Ready for what?" you may ask. "All that time in shul? All that cooking? All those guests?" Well, not exactly. I'm asking more about being ready for what is supposed to happen on those days, Above and below. In essence, I'm really asking if you are yet real with the holiday itself.

Real with the holiday? What's that supposed to mean?

What does it mean to be real with anything? It means that you understand the opportunity a situation offers you at any given moment in time, to the point of not missing it. A person has limited time and resources, and a huge part of life is about wasting neither. You have to know when and where to use both of them.

The Talmud says:

The righteous, even in death are called "living" . . . Evil people, even while alive are called "dead."
(Brochos 18a)

"Living" in this sense is obviously about more than properly functioning body organs. The "living" here are those people who correctly use the opportunity of life, and the "dead" are those who waste it. They squander their time on earth and misuse their resources until they are part of the "living dead."

Why, though, are the righteous called "living" if they are actually dead? When a person uses the opportunity of life correctly, it still serves him after he has passed from this world, as if he is still alive. He leaves a positive legacy based upon his past good deeds, deeds that still impact the world after he has died.

This is what we are judged for on Rosh Hashanah, how real we were, are, with life. The Talmud says:

Three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah, one for completely wicked people, one for completely righteous people, and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous people are immediately inscribed and sealed for life. The completely wicked people are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. Those in the middle have their judgment suspended until Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are written for life, and if not, they are written for death. (Rosh

Hashanah 16b)

This statement can be seen as a line that stretches between two points. To the extreme left of the line, the "home" of the completely evil, is the category, "Not Real," as in not real with life. At the other end, where the completely righteous "live" is "Real." The rest of mankind can be found at billions of different points along this line, depending upon how real each person is with life.

It is a struggle. It is the struggle of life. It is actually the battle between the yetzer tov, man's good inclination, and the yetzer hara, his evil inclination. The yetzer hara is the partier, the one who wants life to be a blast. Fun catches his attention and energizes him to act. Just watch how many people, even as adults, literally run to have fun.

The yetzer tov is real with life. It not only knows about the concept of death, physical and spiritual, it takes them seriously. It is not one to throw caution to the wind, to sacrifice long term gain for short term pleasure. It knows that the temporal is only meant to be a means to the eternal.

The yetzer hara was the author of, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Though it was literal during the French Revolution, it is certainly symbolic at all other times. This is why we are born completely selfish, since we do not receive a yetzer tov until later. Maturity is mostly a function of selflessness. A large part of growing up is learning how to wait for pleasures in life, how to curb the need for instant gratification in pursuit of nobler goals.

Enter this week's parshah. Blessings and curses. Ninety-eight threats. Some more gruesome than others. The parshah is so scary that some congregations used to omit it out of fear. Once upon a time, Jews took its threats seriously, probably because they witnessed their actualization firsthand.

Make no mistake about it: God does not enjoy punishing His people. He makes this clear by beginning with a whole list of blessings and promises of good. He starts with this because He wants us to know that this is the way it ought to be, the way He wants it to be.

However, the Torah says, the good is not free, nor should it be. It is the result of living a Torah lifestyle. It is the product of working on living up to your spiritual potential to the best of your personal ability. It is the spoils of war when we defeat the yetzer hara and its drive for temporal pleasures. None of it is to be taken for granted.

To drive the point home, the Torah then launches into the many curses for doing exactly this. The Torah is not saying that God is vindictive. The Torah is saying, "Understand what it means to stray from Torah, to your spiritual health and to the health of the world.

It's like a doctor who tells his patient, "If you watch what you eat and take care of yourself, you can live a long, healthy life. If you don't, your health will not take care of itself. On the contrary, it will deteriorate rapidly. You will get weaker faster, sicker more often. You might even get cancer, God forbid. Let me take you and show you patients who did exactly that, and how sick they became. It is truly tragic."

Physical health is one of those things for which there is no automatic status quo. It has to be maintained, or it worsens. Creation is the same way. It was founded on chaos, and if man does not actively work on keeping chaos at bay, it keeps coming back and wreaking havoc.

All the countless wars throughout history? Chaos. All the plagues that have killed countless people? Chaos. All the insanity that has intellectually infected society? Chaos again, the result of man not making enough of an effort to control it.

We were give free will to do exactly this. It is our most important distinguishing ability. It is what earns us reward in the World-to-Come. Yet, how many people actually pay attention to it? How many people keep track of just how many REAL free will choices they make on a daily basis?

What IS a real free will choice? It is not choosing between vanilla or chocolate ice cream. It is desiring to do something the Torah forbids, and choosing not to do it instead. Or, it is not feeling like doing that which the Torah commands, and choosing to do it anyhow. It is choosing not to "eat" that spiritually unhealthy thing when almost every molecule in your body is pushing you to "consume" it.

Once there used to be only two categories with respect to the illness of Diabetes: "Diabetes" and "No Diabetes." Since people did not recognize in time when they were transitioning from the latter to the former, the Medical Profession created a new category called "Pre-Diabetes," to act as a warning buffer for people moving in the wrong direction.

Does it work? Does it help people stop eating too much sugar in time to avoid becoming diabetic? It all depends upon the person. If he is real with how close he is to becoming diabetic, and more importantly, the consequences of becoming so, then it works. If not, then the person eats sugary foods thinking that he is safe when he really is not.

One of the greatest obstacles to becoming real with life today is hester panim, God's "hidden face." Evil exists and is even rampant. People get away with so much. They break the Torah with impunity, or so it seems. Although the Holocaust was less than 100 years earlier, Torah consequences have no teeth today.

Even the Holocaust is not necessarily viewed as Divine retribution for straying from Torah. Religious and secular alike suffered equally, even righteous people as well. The Holocaust is a complicated topic, and many prefer to not discuss it in terms of religious implications.

Thus, becoming real with life and free will is really up to the individual. Each person has to take the time to understand that God is not only here today, He's as actively involved in our lives as ever before. The rules of Creation still apply, even if we can't see them in action.

The 10 days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are a tremendous gift that no other nation has. It's like attending a 10-day seminar on the reality of existence and how to work with it to maximize the opportunity of life. It only works, though, if you "attend" it. The more seriously you take the Ten Days of Repentance, the more life becomes real to you.

