

Summer 2018 Message from Rabbi Dubin

“One thing I ask of the Lord”

Preparing for the Days of Awe (and EVERY other day, too)

Conventional wisdom suggests that Yom Kippur is the singularly most important day of the Jewish calendar. It is, after all, on this day that God makes final decisions on whether or not to grant us a good year ahead.

Without diminishing the importance of Yom Kippur, I must confess that I believe it a mistake to place too much importance on any single day. Yes, Yom Kippur matters. It matters terribly. But unless we prepare sufficiently, it also becomes a day built on unreasonable expectations, a lackluster effort that we somehow assume will write us into the Book of Life for good and not bad. To me, this is like expecting to pitch a perfect game without first having taken the time to review our throwing mechanics – or even warm up our arm before the game. Just as success on the field takes time and effort and sustained commitment, so too with living a life of goodness.

The month preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called Elul, and it begins at sundown on Friday, August 10. Elul is fascinating, because while it is a month with no holidays, its holiness could not possibly be any more pronounced. It is, after all, through extended penitential prayer during Elul that we prepare ourselves spiritually for the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

One of the chief additions that we insert into the daily liturgy of Elul is Psalm 27, a special penitential poem that offers a voice of encouragement and reassurance in God’s great capacity to save and protect. We continue this practice until the end of Sukkot, because it is during this period that God is especially focused on deciding our fate. The *Book of Life*, we are told, is sealed on Yom Kippur, and delivered at the end of Sukkot. To help us navigate this awesome period, we turn to heightened power of directed prayer.

The insertion of Psalm 27 into Elul liturgy is a relatively new practice in Jewish life. In fact, the first time it ever made its way into a formal prayer book was in 1745, when the German rabbi and Talmudist, Jacob Emden (1697-1776), published his *Siddur Bet Yaakov*. Psalm 27 is especially suited for Elul for many reasons, the first of which can be found in its very first verse:

*The Lord is my **light** and my **salvation**;
whom should I fear?*

The Ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are an especially precarious time for us. Our very lives, spiritually speaking, depend on successful navigation of the challenges, so we are grateful for every bit of help we can find.

According to tradition, Psalm 27 teaches that the Lord **lights our way** on Rosh Hashanah and **provides our salvation** on Yom Kippur.

As the psalm continues, we come across a particularly curious plea in verse 4:

*One thing I ask of the Lord,
only that do I seek:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life.*

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) was particularly challenged by the notion that we should ask, through the psalmist, to live in the House of the Lord (the Great Temple) all the days of our lives, because were such a dream to come true, we would never have time to do all the other things necessary to living a full life. After all, according to Jewish teaching, prayer and study without follow-up action, is meaningless at best, and perhaps even blasphemous. The fact is, not even the Kohen Gadol, not even the High Priest himself, lived entirely in the Temple.

Rabbi Hirsch teaches, therefore, that rather than reading this verse literally, we should understand it as inspiration to live every day in such a manner that wherever we are, we always create our very own “House of God” around us and all with whom we come into contact. In other words, as Rabbi David Golinkin, President Emeritus of the [Conservative Movement’s] Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem writes, by living in a manner that truly honors our responsibilities to God and to others, “our earthly life becomes a chariot for God’s presence, and God has a place to dwell on this earth.”

As I see it, my friends, this is the goal of the upcoming Days of Awe from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur:

to live in a manner that truly invites God’s presence among us. In order to merit such a gift, however, we cannot assume that Ten Days of Awe alone will be sufficient, which is why we spend the entire month of Elul hard at work, accounting for our behaviors from the preceding year.

Of course, once we do a full accounting, once we truly immerse ourselves in serious and genuine introspection, our eyes then become opened to the reality that repentance cannot be a one-day event on Yom Kippur if we really want to live the best lives we can. Nor can it be limited to the Ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Nor, for that matter, can it be limited even to the Ten Days plus the entire month of Elul. In order for repentance to serve its full function of helping us live lives worthy of God’s choosing to dwell amongst us, our behavior will have to be such that the invitation is issued day in and day out – “all the days of our lives.”

Please do not misunderstand. Yom Kippur truly **is** a singularly important day in our Jewish Calendar. It is the day on which we are taught that God seals our fate for the coming year. So we do hope you will bolster our communal effort at repentance with

your presence this Yom Kippur (September 18-19) at 115 Youmans Ave. And yes, Rosh Hashanah really is another singularly critical day, because it is the day on which we begin the truly heavy lifting that brings us to Yom Kippur. But let us not be fooled into thinking that the entire job can be done on these two days alone. In a sense, it takes the entire month of Elul to bring us to the point of readiness. Then again, even the month of Elul itself cannot be sufficient, because if our goal is to create a situation in which God will choose to live amongst us, we must build and carry that House of God every single place we go. And we must do it every day of our lives. The time is now. The time is always.

*One thing I ask of the Lord,
only that do I seek:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life.*

Wishing us all strength in our efforts,
Rabbi Dubin

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