



STRIVING UPWARDS TOGETHER NEXT YEAR

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Let's say you're an active member of your congregation—or you're not. Maybe you come to synagogue regularly—maybe not. Maybe it's your time, energy, and spirit that keep the synagogue going—maybe it's not.

But whichever categories you're in, the time of year is approaching when all of us come together again in a congregation. The ostensible purpose of our congregating is *teshuvah*, which is the necessary condition to improve both the coming year and us. Presumably, the ideal motivation for attending High Holy Day services is to turn our lives to those ends. Hopefully, each of us individually comes with the intention to somehow use the liturgy and ritual of these Days of Awe to become a better *Jewish* human being.

That's not the same, of course, as being a better Christian or Muslim. Torah and Judaism present us with a very unique vision and path for our lives. Those of us who have studied that vision and path, even superficially, know that they are distinguished from other spiritual traditions by substantive differences. We could write at length about those differences, but there's one in particular that we want to highlight here.

As the B'nei Yisrael, the children of Israel, we are counted before God as individual human beings, as well as members of our families. But our standing before God at Mount Sinai, when we became the Jewish *people*, was affirmed when we said "*na'aseh v'nishmah*"—we will do and we will hear—with one voice. We began our life as the *plural* Children of Israel in a covenant with God, emerging as a whole people, not simply a collection of individuals. And as they say in Gestalt psychology, the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

If we want to claim Jewish identity, for whatever intellectual or emotional reason or practical purpose, but we have no investment and stake in the past and future of the Jewish people and its

Torah, then our claim is bogus and self-serving. At best it's hardly more than camouflage for the unfortunate loss of *midot*, the moral spiritual and religious character traits that define a Jewish life.

Authentic Jewish identity has each of us not only counted *in*, but also counted *upon* as a member of a Torah-centered community and the Jewish people. If we come to High Holy Day services with the narrow intention of improving only our own lives and those of our family members, indifferent for all practical purposes to the welfare of our congregational community and people, then we're not behaving as Jews. That kind of behavior doesn't fit the tradition that we're claiming in order to affirm our identity.

In the Torah reading *parashat* Yitro, there is a verse that reads: "And Moses came down from the mountain to the people." Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) comments that, "This verse teaches us that Moses did not [then] turn to his affairs, but [turned] from the mountain to the people."

Rabbi Yehezkel of Kozmir (Ezekiel ben Zevi-Hirsch Taub of Kazimierz, d. 1856) inquires: "And what business affairs did Moses our teacher have besides the teaching of Torah? What then can I understand when it says, 'he did not turn to his affairs'? This comes to teach you that even 'his affairs,' which were the affairs of Torah and the desires of Heaven, were not turned to by Moses our teacher as long as he dealt with the needs of the community and the nation. From here we learn that the affairs of the community are more important to be dealt with publicly than the affairs of Heaven dealt with privately."

We propose that this year we come to High Holy Day services not as private consumers of religious services, but with the public *kavanah*—that is, with a focused *communal* spiritual intention—to raise, support, and sustain our congregation by

attending not only to our own needs, but potentially to the needs of every other member.

How could we do that?

Much depends on our attitudes. We could begin by giving every other person the benefit of the doubt, especially those people whom we've judged too quickly and harshly in the past. We could focus our judgmental eyes on ourselves, on our own missteps and misdeeds, not those of others. We could act *b'tzelem* Adonai, in the image of

God, by looking for, valuing, and encouraging the unique contribution that each person is able to make to our community and our people. And we could reach a high point by consciously committing ourselves to strive upwards together as a spiritual community in all these ways this coming year.

We look forward to striving upwards together with you next year.

L'shanah tovah!

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