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Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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WHY NOT TIME FOR GOD?

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It's that time of year that brings to mind the lyrics from Porgy and Bess: "Summertime and the living is easy. . . ." If most of us had our way, we'd let go, lie back, and drop everything that gets in the way of our rest and relaxation. For many, that means not doing anything "religious."

But only weeks from now, the Jewish month of Elul begins. So the time is almost here to prepare for the coming High Holy Days that follow Elul, when as a people we reinvigorate the struggle to turn our lives toward the image of God.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we seek to jettison the parts of ourselves that are deathly and dead and to affirm the parts that are alive and life-giving. Elul, then, is the month to actively compare our behavior over the past year to the vision and path held up by Torah and its commandments.

Commandments & Blessings

The Torah portion Re'eh, which we encounter just before the beginning of Elul, sets the stage: "See, I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, that you hearken to the commandments of Adonai your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you shall not hearken to the commandments of Adonai your God, but turn aside out of the path that I command you this day, to go after other gods that you have not known." (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch teaches us several important lessons about these three verses: Re'eh (ראה—literally, "see") asks us to do more than *look* as passive observers; we are actively to examine our own experience and that of our family, *kehilla*, (congregation) and people. When we do so we can see that the Creator has, for the most part, placed our fate for good or ill in our own hands.

The blessing and curse mentioned in the text are not what *befall* us. Rabbi Hirsch teaches us that the blessing, *berakha*, from the root ב-ר-ך, refers to the knee joint, which, because it bends, allows us to move forward in our lives, acting in ways that up-

lift us and those around us, by virtue of our own will. The curse, *haklala*, from the root כ-ל-ל, which connotes lightness, is being without weight, from our choosing to be shallow or worthless.

We may learn from this that we are blessing ourselves when we do the *mitzvah* (commandment); we are enervating our self-worth and value when we fail to do the *mitzvah*. In those proverbial words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us!"

But what if we aren't familiar with the Torah's 613 commandments or, worse still, we don't "believe" in them?

That's often a round-about way of opining, "I don't like being *commanded*—and, anyway, a lot of the commandments don't make any sense to me."

If we find ourselves in such a place at this time of the year, our ability to turn to God during High Holy Days may be very limited.

But what are "commandments," and why might we "hearken" to them? Is a Biblical *commandment* something we are compelled to do, the decree of an oppressive authority to which we must submit?

No, of course not—we're all living proof that we may choose to ignore the commandments.

Commandments are regarded as a gift in our tradition. They communicate to us the positive and negative consequences for certain kinds of behavior, sparing us the discovery of those consequences throughout our lives entirely by painful trial and error (the way children usually do). Most of us come to understand at an early age that ignoring *ethical* commandments—prohibitions against stealing, slander, cheating, lying, etc.—has destructive consequences. And for those of us who observe them, we also learn that performing *ritual* commandments—wearing a head covering, lighting Shabbat candles, keeping kosher, etc.—can have positive consequences. (In time we may learn to appreciate the necessary and systemic connection between ethical and ritual commandments.)

Communal Observance

Consistent with this understanding of the *mitzvot*, the Torah assures us: “And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently to My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your corn and your wine, and your oil.” (Deuteronomy 11:13-14)

So if we personally observe all the commandments, it will rain exactly the right amount at exactly the right time to satisfy our crops? Our businesses will prosper? We’ll have love and romance? And our children will always grow up to become doctors, lawyers, and accountants?

That’s patent nonsense, of course, and it would have seemed so three thousand years ago, since two neighboring farmers would get the same benefit from the weather even if one wasn’t observing many of the commandments; and the opposite was certainly true, since it was not uncommon to see someone who was observant nonetheless suffering from deprivation not visited on the impious.

In fact, the epigrammatic observation that “no good deed goes unpunished” has become a cliché because of its ubiquity in a society increasingly marked by cynical dedication to the “fast buck” and “situational ethics.”

So why then should we believe that our tenure and fecundity on the land, or any other quality-of-life measure, is linked to our acceptance and performance of the commandments?

Our traditional Torah commentators offer some insights on this question:

Or Hachayim’s understanding is that, “Receiving rainfall at the appropriate time *is not the reward* for . . . commandment-performance, but is something additional. . . .” (Our emphasis.)

The Sforno explains part of a similar verse as follows: “*If you shall hearken . . . I will give the rain of your land . . .* [is to be understood as], in a manner that you will find sustenance without pain, and will be able to serve Him.”

And Rashi comments: “But did he not *already* admonish us, ‘[And you shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and with all your soul’ (Deuteronomy 6:5)? [That, however, was] an admonition addressed for the individual [while this is] an admonition to the community. (Sifrei)”

All this serves to teach us two lessons: First, that whatever power there is in observance of the *mitzvot*, it is largely *communal*, not individual; that is, it’s not a guarantee to us personally, but a consequence of acting or failing to act together as a *kahal poalei tzedek*, a community of doers of right-

eousness and justice. Second, it is not a quantitative but a *qualitative* guarantee; that is, we do *not* ensure necessary rainfall or other material benefit even if we observe the *mitzvot* as a community, but it is within our power to reduce our own pain—the pain of loneliness in travail, the pain of inadequacy in natural catastrophe, the pain of isolation in the face of aggression, and so on.

Doing Good & Doing Well

Yet even if we acknowledge that it’s in our self-interest to accept the commandments as members of a *kahal*, realistically how can we “take care of business”—the *tachlis* of our *parnasa*—while satisfying the spiritual and religious demands of the commandments? How can we do good and do well at the same time?

According to Akeidat Yitzchak, “Moses’ warning about the need to observe all the *mitzvot* now that Israel is about to enter the holy land, is a reminder that the period of dependence on the King’s largesse is drawing to a close. . . . Should the nation ask how they could ensure their economic survival if they are to be constantly occupied with spiritual matters such as studying the Torah, they are reminded that they had learned during 40 long years [in the wilderness] that the pursuit of material values is not the only way to ensure one’s economic success in the world.”

And the sages (Berachot 35b) question how it is possible to reconcile the teaching that “the Torah should never be absent from your mouth” (Joshua 1:8) with the directive to pursue an agricultural career—plowing, sowing, harvesting, etc. The substance of their answer is that, there are times set aside for both of these activities, although they recognize the importance of prioritizing Torah over vocation: “The earlier generations made the study of the Torah their main concern and their ordinary work subsidiary to it, and both prospered in their hands. The later generations made their ordinary work their main concern and their study of the Torah subsidiary, and neither prospered in their hands.”

Rashi teaches us to study and learn the will of God not to gain material possession or position, not for power or prestige, “but out of love, and eventually honor will come.” What does honor mean in this context? Not the empty rhetorical flourishes we know nowadays when someone is honored for their contributions. The root of the Hebrew word for “honor” is *kaveid* (כבד), the meaning of which is to be heavy, weighty, or burdensome. The etymology of the word describes distress and struggle with difficulties and burdens, leading to abundance and glory.

We may also learn from Rashi that, “If you hearken to the old, you will hearken to the new.” That is, if you study what you think you have already learned, you will acquire a new and deeper understanding to guide your life.

Elul is the month designated and designed in our tradition to begin that study and preparation.

Questions to Ask Ourselves

We always have the choice of whether to make our actions a blessing or a curse—propelling us forward full of promise or emptying us of value and worth—for our people, our community, our family,

and *us*.

So now especially, when we are anticipating the coming month of Elul and the High Holy Days that follow, we might ask ourselves these questions:

Have I ever had a spiritual pursuit lead to some form of material benefit? Have I ever regularly set aside time from work or business for something that was important to me?

Why not consider the Torah’s vision and path for my life? Why not take time to reflect on my actions this past year in the light of Torah?

Why not time for God during Elul?

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