

SEPTEMBER 24, 2008

Rosh Hashanah

Making a World of Difference

Hayom Harat Olam... – “On this day the world was created” (Mussaf Repetition for Rosh Hashanah)

Can one person really make a difference? Can one person truly change the world? Rosh Hashanah reminds us that the power to affect the entire world lies within the grasp of each of us.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) teaches us: “Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Shimon said: because the world is judged following the majority, and the individual is also judged following the majority – one who performs a single *mitzvah* – he is fortunate, for he leaned both himself and the entire world towards the side of merit. If he violates one sin – woe is to him, for he leaned both himself and the entire world towards the side of liability.”

During the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, we pray, “As a shepherd seeks out his flock, making his sheep pass under his rod, so do You make all the living souls pass before You; You count and number your creatures, fixing the lifetime of every creation and inscribing their destiny.” On one hand, we are individuals, counted individually, standing before God on the Day of Judgment. At the same time, we stand before God as members of a community, as members of a flock, as constituents of a larger group.

On Rosh Hashanah we evaluate both our personal relationship with God and our standing within our local, national and even global communities. God examines each of us as individuals, as members of our communities, as citizens of our countries, as members of the Jewish people, and finally, as inhabitants of the world. And, as God scrutinizes each of us, God evaluates how we affected those around us, whether for the positive or not. Did we change ourselves? Did we affect our community? Did we benefit our country? Were we a force for good in the Jewish people? Did we change the world?

The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) highlights this tension between individuality and communal responsibility: “Man was created alone to teach us that whoever destroys a Jewish soul, the verse treats him as if he has destroyed an entire world; but whoever saves a Jewish soul, the verse considers him as if he saved an entire world... The King of Kings hewed each human being in the stamp of Adam, but not one of them is identical to another. Therefore, each and every person is obligated to say: ‘the world was created for me.’”

Rosh Hashanah presents the opportunity to evaluate ourselves in these two important lights. Did we improve this past year as individuals? Did we exhibit ethical clarity, moral fortitude, and emotional strength? Yet, that individuality also manifests itself in our communal behavior. Did we share in the suffering of our brothers in Israel? Did we sense the desperation of the residents of Sderot, who lived this past year under constant threat of bombardment? Did we consider the plight of Gilad Schalit, sitting captive in a cell on this very day – as he has for well over two years? Did we feel the pain of the families of the innocent victims of terrorist acts in Jerusalem – whether they were students gunned down in cold blood in their yeshiva, or shoppers trampled by a tractor while out to buy dinner at the market.

Did we expend the energy to strengthen our community on all levels – as members of our synagogue, as citizens of our municipality and the United States, and as members of the Jewish people – by voicing our support for a continued U.S.-Israel relationship based on not only common threats, but on shared values? Were we sensitive to the threat that

Iran poses not only to Israel, but to the stability of the entire world as it lurches ever-closer to nuclear capability? Were we cognizant of the danger that radical terrorism – as practiced by both Hamas, Hizballah and Al Qaeda – poses not just to Israel, but to the entire world? And, perhaps most importantly, did we do anything to stop it?

Let us resolve then to strengthen ourselves this year on both levels: as individuals, and as members of the larger community. Let us resolve not only to feel, but to act, to defend and protect the common interests of both America and the State of Israel. That resolve truly does change lives. It not only changes our own lives, but it affects every community in which we live. It affects the synagogue, our city, the United States, and the Jewish people.

Let us never forget the powerful lesson that our rabbis taught us: this Rosh Hashanah, each and every one of us truly does have the power to change the world. ■

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