

Synaplex Class: 10 Tips to Prepare for the High Holidays, 8/2013

1) *How to Survive Synagogue*

Synagogue is difficult under the best of circumstances, with the average Shabbat service going on for two hours plus.

One Saturday morning a mother went into her son's room and said,
"Arnold, get up, it's time to go to shul!"

"Oh, c'mon, Mom. I don't want to go to shul today. Services are so long, and everyone there is so mean to me. Give me two reasons why I should go to shul today!"

"Arnold -- the first reason is that you're forty five years old. The second reason isyou're the rabbi!"

With extremely long services on the High Holidays, staying focused is a daunting challenge. Here are a few ideas to help you survive synagogue over the holidays.

1) *Preview coming attractions.* Leaf through the Machzor (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayer book) before the Holidays.

2) *Pick your spots.* 5 minutes of prayer said with understanding, feeling and a personal connection to the words and their significance means far more than five hours of lip service. Shouldn't you have at least one meaningful, spiritual experience during the course of the holidays? If a particular sentence, prayer or paragraph touches you, linger over it.

3) *Savor.* Read through the prayers and slowly think about what you're saying and don't be concerned about being behind. The worst that will happen? You won't be arrested by the davening police. You'll fall behind -- and they'll announce the pages.

4) *English, por favor.* You're not fluent in Hebrew? Don't worry -- Hashem speaks a pretty good English -- and knows your heart.

5) *Being there is half the fun.* As you sit in synagogue on the High Holidays, realize you are joined by hundreds in your synagogue. Take pleasure in being part of a community. And remember that you're joining millions of Jews in synagogues all over the world. You're a Jew, and are making a powerful statement about your commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people.

2) *Tshuva (Repentance)*

You may not know this about me, but I can never go back to Boise, Idaho.

The reason why I can never go back to Boise is because of the simple fact that I have never been to Boise, and you just can't go back to a place which you have never been! Now most

people will tell you that to “repent” means to change one’s ways and become a “different” and “better” person. In fact, the online dictionary Dictionary.com writes that one meaning of repentance is “to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one’s life for the better”.

In this case, the dictionary just so happens to be wrong (so don’t believe everything you read on the Internet!).

Tshuva -- one of three strategies to 'tear up the evil decree', is best translated as 'return'; returning to Hashem, and returning to the state of spiritual purity with which we were created.

A human being is a composite of body & soul that were created to work in tandem. But at times there's a tension between what we want to do, and what we feel like doing. Our rabbis describe the body/soul partnership like that of a horse and rider. The horse represents the body -- a most powerful and capable physical entity. The rider represents the soul. If a rider can expertly control the horse, marvelous, wondrous things can be accomplished. But an uncontrolled horse might take its rider right off a cliff.

We know the right thing to do ...but a funny thing happens on the way to Yom Kippur. Why? Because we make mistakes (poor choices, not 'sins') and do what we feel like, not what we want to do.

How do we 'return' from these mistakes of 'missing the mark'? We employ the 4-step process of tshuva:

1) Regret/ *Charatah* (not guilt): acknowledge that a mistake was made, and feel regret at having squandered some of our potential.

2) Stop/ *Aziva*: identify the rationalization, commit to not doing it again. Talk is cheap, but stopping the harmful action shows a true commitment to change.

3) Confession/ *Viduy* : There is no greater torture to a child (and others) than to have to apologize. Verbalizing shines a spotlight -- there's no mistaking who did it. To make it more “real,” we admit our mistake verbally, and ask forgiveness from anyone we may have harmed.

4) Resolution/ *Kabalah*: Make a plan. We make a firm commitment not to repeat the harmful action in the future.

3) Tefilah (Prayer)

Different approaches exist in relating to prayer. Hopefully one will open a path to enable you to have an encounter with one of the richest treasures of Jewish life. Prayer is considered one of the 3 pillars upon which the world stands.

1) Talking to G-d

4 out of 5 people in America say that G-d answers their prayers. What about you? Have you ever prayed and really meant it? Have you ever spoken to G-d or cried out to Him from the depths of your being? Did He answer you?

The story is told of a young man who once drove his bicycle off the side of a cliff, but on the way down grabbed an overhanging branch growing out from the cliff side. He called out, "Help! Is anyone out there?" The clouds parted, and a booming voice called out, "Yes, it's Me -- G-d. I'm here to save you. Let go of the branch, and I'll catch you." At that, the young man again looked upward and called out, "Is there anyone else out there?"

When we study Torah, G-d talks to us

When we pray, we talk to G-d. Two-way communication is essential in any relationship.

Prayer helps to establish and renew our relationship with the Almighty.

2) Self-inquiry and instrument for change

There's a difference between the Hebrew word *tefila* and English word *pray*. *Tefila*, from the infinitive *hitpalel*, means to examine and judge oneself. *Pray* originates from an old word that means *to ask*. Quite a difference, isn't it?

While standing in the presence of Hashem, we examine our actions, attitude, and character. In life, it's essential to 'know where you stand'. When I say in the prayers "sound the great shofar to return the exiles", am I bothered by the fact that there are Jews unable to emigrate to Israel? When I say, "bless this year", do I recognize that G-d is the source of all my blessings?

3) Exercise of a crucial spiritual muscle...

Gratitude. There's a rampant misconception that the essence of prayer is to ask for things. While the Almighty does want us to turn to Him for our needs, more important is to acknowledge that Hashem is the source of our blessings. The proper translation of the words '*Boruch atah ...*' is "You, Hashem, are the source of all blessings"

4) *Tzedaka/ Charity*

A young boy in our congregation recently invited me to visit his lemonade stand. I asked his father how much would he be charging per cup. The father said, 'Nothing ...he said he has to give all his profits to *tzedaka*.' That purity, simplicity, and intuitive understanding of the right thing to do expresses the difference between charity and *tzedaka*. Charity implies a magnanimous act of giving. *Tzedaka* means justice -- and from the Torah perspective, justice isn't optional.

The Torah standard of *tzedaka* is between 10-20% of one's income. Many individuals blanch at giving what they perceive to be such a large portion of their resources. I often hear, "That's a lot of money, rabbi. I can't give away that much money!"

If someone gave you \$100 on the condition that you'd give away between \$10 to \$20 would you do it? If someone said, "I'll give you \$1000 if you give away \$100 to \$200", would you take them up on that offer? Hashem provides us with our livelihood on the condition we share some of it with others. That's simply the right thing to do. The average American gives about 2% of their income to 'charity.' We, the Jewish people, can do better.

There are preferable ways to give *tzedaka*. Optimally, provide someone with a job, and give anonymously to enable the recipient to preserve their dignity. And *tzedaka* can involve the giving of one's time, in addition to material resources.

5) ABCs of Rosh Hashana

The essence of Yom Kippur is self-evident; *tshuva*. *Vidui* (the confession) is recited 10 times throughout the day, with Divine forgiveness and atonement our clear objectives. But in a nutshell, how would we describe Rosh Hashana? Though Rosh Hashana is the beginning of the new year, most have a sense that it is something more than a Jewish January 1.

Psalm 27 was chosen by our rabbis to be read for a 50 day period commencing with the month of Elul. In it King David refers to Rosh Hashana as *Ori*-- my light. With a focus on the Almighty as King, Rosh Hashana comes to shed light on my priorities. It calls out, "Wake up - - who are you? Appreciate who G-d is, and what He means to your life. Clarify what you're living for, and what is truly important."

Why does Rosh Hashana take place before Yom Kippur? Not that anyone asked me, but on my own I would have arranged the Day of Atonement to precede the Day of Judgement; get your atonement, and find out what your sentence is. But with an act of supreme kindness, the Almighty allowed us to be judged *before* we seek forgiveness. Now, with the weight of the judgement hanging over our heads (or upon our necks), we'll be motivated to clarify our priorities and make a vigorous effort to utilize the cleansing and changing power of Yom Kippur.

The tool of Rosh Hashana is the shofar. It tells us:

Tekiah: A long, straight blast -- the sound of the King's coronation

Shevarim: 3 medium, wailing blasts -- the sobbing of a Jewish heart yearning to grow, connect, and achieve

Teruah: 10 quick blasts: An alarm clock that brings clarity, alertness, and focus

6) Question Box

Without a doubt the food at our many holiday meals will be delicious. But will the meal-time conversations be nourishing and spiritually satisfying? By preparing questions to be used at your family meals, you can prompt meaningful conversations. Try going around the table and asking everyone to respond to one of the questions. For Shabbat and every Jewish holiday be prepare a *Question Box*.

- 1) When do I most feel that my life is meaningful?
- 2) Are there any ideals I would be willing to die for?
- 3) If I could live my life over, would I change anything?
- 4) What would bring me more happiness in the world?
- 5) What are my 3 most significant achievements since last R.H.?
- 6) What are the 3 biggest mistakes I've made since last R.H.?
- 7) What project or goal, if left undone, will I most regret next R.H.?
- 8) If I knew I couldn't fail -- what would I undertake to accomplish in life?
- 9) What are my three major goals in life?
 - What am I doing to achieve them?
 - What practical steps can I take in the next 2 months towards these goals?
- 10) If I could only give my children 3 pieces of advice what would they be?

7) *Giant Leaps*

In what was arguably the most well-known quote of the 20th century, astronaut Neil Armstrong said upon stepping onto the moon, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

A meaningful, purposeful live requires Giant Leaps.

The Talmud says that one who goes seven days without dreaming is a wicked person. Clearly many individuals don't remember their dreams. On a metaphorical level this surprising Talmudic passage can be understood in the following way: We can understand an individual who goes for six days without hopes, dreams, and aspirations. After all, the burdens of daily living may prevent such 'dreaming.' However, someone who, following six days of toil and travail, also goes through a Shabbat (the 7th day) 'without dreaming' is at great risk of spiritual stagnation.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are the times to dream again, when we and all of creation is renewed. With the beginning of the New Year we should sense no limitations. After all, even Cubs fans have hope in spring training!

What would you do if you weren't afraid of failing? What do you want on your tombstone? Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, had the rare opportunity to read his own obituary. When his brother died some journalist mistakenly believed that the more-famous Nobel passed away, and published Alfred's obituary. Mortified and stunned at being described as 'The Doctor of Death' because of his invention of dynamite, Nobel changed his life's direction to promote scientific and cultural achievements by establishing the Nobel prizes.

The High Holidays is a time for Giant Leaps. Reach for the stars; you might not catch any, but at least you won't get your hands stuck in the mud!

8) Small Steps

Walking on the moon was a giant leap. But that fantastic journey was preceded by a million small steps.

Our giant leaps consist of our small steps. Great transformations can only occur with consistent, small strides. How did man get to the moon? Did he just decide to fly there one day? The journey to the moon was achieved the same way we finish a book -- step by step.

Each exercise movement helps build your body's health. Small snowflakes add up to feet of snow. Small bricks build an entire house. Every single small Ingredient makes a whole recipe. Seconds add up to minutes. Minutes become hours. Each dollar of charity keeps the cause alive. Each phone call to a lonely person makes that person feel needed and loved. Each helping hand clears a dinner table.

The Talmud says, "*tafasta m'ruba, lo tafasta*"; one who takes too much is left with nothing. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski says that a sign in an addiction support group he supervises reads, "The elevator is broken, please take the 12 steps."

Before the High Holidays, look to take small, measurable steps.

9) Fly Under the Radar

Back in the old days when my wife allowed me to do the grocery shopping (until she realized I was buying too many generic brands), I discovered there were two ways of buying apples; individually, or by the bag. When single apples are purchased, the apple of choice was required to be near-perfect without brown spots, holes, or other noticeable blemishes. But when buying apples by the bag, as long as most of the apples looked passably edible -- into the shopping cart it went.

So too, on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. If we attempt to stand on our own before the Almighty, we pretty well must be near-perfect to have our prayers for a sweet New Year fully accepted. However, if we're an 'apple in the bag' -- joining and blending in with our congregation and community -- we stand a much greater chance of our imperfections being ignored.

On the High Holidays, then, a strategy for success is to fly under the radar.

The Book of Kings tells the story of a righteous woman who was offered a 'blank check' by the Almighty, through the prophet Elisha. Whatever she might desire or need was hers.

'See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?'

Her response?

She answered, "I dwell among my own people." (2 Kings 4:13)

In other words, "No thank you." The righteous woman understood the disadvantage of standing out. The sum of the Jewish people is greater than the total of the individual parts. On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, dwell among your people.

10) Reconcile

Two of the most difficult words in the English language to express are: I'm sorry (three, if you count the contraction as two).

Why is it so difficult to apologize? It's painful to come face-to-face with our true self image -- that of someone who is flawed. The words 'I'm sorry' stick in the throat of an arrogant person. Ted Turner once said, "I once made a mistake in my life. I thought I was wrong, but I was mistaken." He was joking ...I hope!

There is something to be said for apologizing even if you weren't wrong. It is the fulfillment of the mitzva of *v'ahavta l'rayecha k'mocha* -- Loving your friend as yourself.

Pick one person before Rosh Hashana with whom you've been estranged, or where there exist frayed feelings. Reconcile.