

## **Yamim Noraim: A symbolic journey from birth to death and beyond**

Birth, Death and Beyond is less lighthearted than Bed, Bath and Beyond (although those who dread big box stores may disagree) but it is more deeply rooted in our collective psyche. Birth, death and beyond may be the most succinct way of summing up the transformation that lies ahead for the Jewish people in the weeks to come.

We customarily come to synagogue on **Rosh HaShana**, the first day of *Tishri*, in at least one article of clothing that is new (End-of-season clearance sales! Go!). Our tradition teaches that this joyous day is the birthday of the world and, as such, our mood is one of hopefulness. Our *Yom Tov* meal features the sweetness of honey and new seasonal fruits. Our services for this day are serious yet also suffused with the joy of renewal and rebirth.

This theme is expressed in our scriptural readings for the day. It is traditional, where two days of Rosh HaShana are observed, to read from *Beresheet* (Genesis) 21 in which Isaac is miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah who are, at this point, well beyond “a certain age.” Our rabbis taught that this birth took place on Rosh HaShana. Our haftarah reading for this day is a parallel story of Hannah who, after years of infertility and fervent prayer, gives birth to her son, Shmuel, who is to become a great prophet. According to rabbinic tradition, Shmuel was conceived on Rosh HaShana.

We carry this spirit of hopefulness through the ten days that follow -- the *Yamim Nora-im* -- even as we focus on the difficult and even painful inner work that is required if we are truly to be reborn. **Shabbat Shuvah** (Shabbat of Return) is the Shabbat that falls during this time and we focus particularly on prayer, repentance and self-reflection throughout the day (You may have noticed the slight adaptations/additions that appear in our *siddur* for this particular Shabbat).

**Yom Kippur**, the 10<sup>th</sup> of *Tishri*, takes us to a different and more difficult place; the overall tone of the day is somber and harsh. Years ago, a rabbinical school friend of mine commented: “The problem with Reform Jews is that they want Chanukah without Yom Kippur.” I think of this sentiment often and it reminds me that the central purpose of Judaism is not to be “fun” but to be “true.” And truth necessarily embraces the entire range of human experiences, including those dark and unsettling.

I believe, to truly live the Yom Kippur experience to its fullest, one must remain with the community throughout the day. There is a holistic flow in terms of content and tone that brings us through the powerful and plaintive presentation of *Kol Nidre* in the evening, the harsh reminders of our mortality through the special liturgy, our public, communal confessions of sin, the traditional remembrance of our people’s martyrs in the afternoon, the reading of Jonah, the unwilling prophet who directs his energy toward fleeing what he has been called to do, the *Yizkor* service which connects us to our grief and loss, and then the lifting of our mood – just when we are at our weakest, hungriest, and most beaten down – with the hopeful prayers of *Ne’ilah* including *havdallah* and the sounding of the *shofar*. We then join together to enthusiastically enjoy our evening meal as compatriots who, together, have toughed out days of (spiritual) boot camp: a bit roughed up emotionally and physically, but transformed into beings better ready to see life with new eyes and meet the world with a new soul.

If “birth” is Rosh HaShana and “death” is Yom Kippur, then “beyond” is the 11<sup>th</sup> day of *Tishri*, September 29<sup>th</sup>. It is on this post-*Yamim Nora-im* day that the rubber of our Yom Kippur promises meets the road of our daily lives. It is this day after Yom Kippur that demonstrates whether we have truly heard God’s words as expressed through Isaiah in our morning haftarah reading:

“Is this the fast I have chosen? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast day acceptable to the Eternal? Is not **this** the fast I have chosen: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to . . . share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house?”

May the investments we make through true introspection, repentance and prayer in the days ahead yield a better, deeper and more fulfilling year for us all. May our words and actions on the Day of Atonement play out as real changes in our words and actions of 5770.