

Reflections On Shabbat Shuvah (The Sabbath Of Return) 2007: There Are More Years Behind Me Than There Are Ahead Of Me

September 14, 2007

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Abstract: Shabbat Shuvah carries a sense of urgency. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is just around the corner. Meanwhile, Rosh Hashanah has already come and gone. The New Year of 5768 has already begun. Will this New Year be just like the last, no better and no worse? Or will we resolve to make this New Year truly different? ...It is time to return. Return to God. Return to our highest and best selves. Return to the youthful ideals from which we have strayed. It is time to turn the direction of our lives.

As you know, tonight begins the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. What you may not know is that this Shabbat holds a special distinction and a special title. Tonight begins Shabbat Shuvah – the Sabbath of Return, so named after a famous verse from the book of Hosea: *Shuvah yisrael* – Return O Israel (14:2).

To what should we return? Return to God. Return to our highest and best selves. Return to the youthful ideals from which we have strayed. Shabbat Shuvah holds a sense of urgency. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is just around the corner. Meanwhile, Rosh Hashanah has already come and gone. The New Year of 5768 has already begun. Will this New Year be just like the last, no better and no worse? Or will we resolve to make this New Year truly different?

And if you are like me, there is a special urgency at work. I can hardly believe it but I've reached the point in my life when there are my years behind me than there are ahead of me. The words of Bachya Ibn Pakuda, one of our great sages from the medieval period, really speak to me. Perhaps they speak to you as well: "The days of our lives are like scrolls: write on them only what you want remembered."

It's time to make amends. It's time to be free of private pains and secret sorrows. It's time to finally get right this business of living. And if we want this New Year to be truly qualitatively different from the last, we have spiritual work to do. There are 4 spiritual actions we can take.

Step one: we set aside some time for *cheshbon hanefesh*, time for personal reflection and soul searching. We revisit the past year, its triumphs and its tribulations. Of what are you most proud? Of what are you not so proud? How will you do differently in 5768?

Step two: we seek reconciliation with the people from whom we've become estranged. Jewish ethics teaches that it's not sufficient to come to services to say to God "I'm sorry for what I did." Now is the time to seek, directly, the forgiveness of those we have hurt or offended, wittingly or unwittingly.

Step three: Jewish ethics prohibits the holding of a grudge. And while some things are truly unforgivable, they are very rare. We can forgive far more than we do. Now is the time to forgive – before it's too late. Now is the time to turn an enemy into a friend.

Step four: it is a hallowed Jewish custom to visit those we have loved and lost between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We commune with our ancestors to gain wisdom and strength, to share our joys as well. Renowned author Elie Wiesel wrote this about his father who perished in the holocaust: "My father is not dead. My father is a book, and books do not die."

If we follow through on these 4 spiritual steps, we will reach new depths of love and compassion that we didn't believe we were capable of. If we follow these 4 spiritual steps, we will find fulfillment in our relationships we never thought possible.

In the spirit of Shabbat Shuvah, please join me now in offering together the beautiful prayer by Rabbi Jack Reimer, "Hard Questions."