

## **Reflections on Rosh Hashanah**

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Good evening. My name is James Diskant. I have been a member of Kahal B'raira for 4 years, having been drawn to KB for its philosophical approach towards Judaism and pondering life's questions. The answers to what we need to do during the next ten days have been clearly stated throughout this service and summed up well in the last quote from Zohar, "we should not waste time". However, I want to discuss reasons why for many of us, despite our good intentions, such expectations remain unfulfilled and why it is, in fact, difficult to use our time wisely. It is hard to disagree with the following thoughts that are often stated at these services: "We should take responsibility. We should be a moral example for ourselves, for others whom we love and encounter in our daily lives."

Rather than discuss the "should's" I want to discuss the problems that we all face in meeting the responsibilities of this new beginning, the New Year. Yes, coming together as a community of like-minded humanists, as Phil reminds us, does help, but as a historian (rather than an organizer), I want to remind us of individual difficulties that we face as we remember all of our deeds, both good and bad. In my view we need to accept the importance of prioritizing what we can achieve or we will be disappointed as we start this period of reflection. Three kinds of issues stand in the way of a complete embrace of doing the necessary work to start the year over: they are personal choices, our history, and the political world that we confront daily. I want to explore each of these one at a time. In so doing perhaps we can develop realistic strategies to meet our responsibilities.

First, personal choices can liberate us, but they also limit us. We are complex people. We are made up of traits that may get in the way of following the most humanistic approaches of Judaism and to reflect on the past and to learn from it. We may be torn in different directions which may leave us confused about which direction to turn. Our lives are busy; while we say that we can make time to reflect at the end of one year and at the start of a new one, we do not always make it happen. So – a year goes by and we still say to our selves, next year I will make time, but will we, honestly? Yes, there are some things that I do well in my interconnected roles – husband, parent, teacher, and simply human being – and there are other things that I do poorly.

Yes, I did help separate clothes recently for the victims of Katrina, who were forced to relocate to Houston, Texas (that was being organized at my daughter's school). But doing that meant not doing something else. Even if the something else would have been only for myself; who decides what is more worthwhile? If I had done some other more self-centered thing (which I don't even remember now what it was!), I may have felt more rejuvenated to deal with my personal responsibilities, but who knows? I have chosen at this stage of life not to organize, but in my approach to teaching history to inner-city kids, I emphasize the value of community organization. My poster "Organize" – with the "fish" learning to swim together for support -- is there to remind my students (and me) of an essential lesson of history: that is the value of working together for a common goal. But is it enough to teach about working together or should I practice it more myself by joining a movement that involves positive change for others?

Second, our history can liberate us, but it too also limits us. As complex people, our histories both expand and control us. Expand, as we accept who we are, both from

our ancestors thousands of years ago and during our relatively short lives on this earth. We are reminded as members of a community of a long past of discrimination and unfairness. Do we have the tools to act upon the lessons of our history? Or do we retreat inwardly? I am a child of a Holocaust survivor, one of those wealthy folks with resources, ingenuity, and foresight. Do I learn, as my mother had learned, to emphasize personal survival and not to look back? Do I learn the importance of community support? My mother downplayed the importance of the help of her American (Jewish) relatives in her successful escape from Europe. I learned about it after she died at which point I embraced my Jewish past. Rather than deny history, we need to accept its complexity: its redeeming, conforming, and even terrifying qualities. What can we do, given who we are?

Third, the political world outside of our control can liberate, but it can also limit us. While I admire people for their activism, I have chosen to retreat more inward – after countless years of community political activism – and not focus on organization, except in my role as a teacher. Yes, as members of a community we have responsibilities. But when there is conflict within our community and the agendas of those in power do not allow us to express ourselves as we wish, or to meet our goals for social justice, where are we? Given my political views – and my Jewish identity – I do feel like a minority. When setting a moral example – standing up for the underdog or for the abstract quality of justice – does not work; one wonders how to proceed.

When I first wrote these comments I had meant national and/or international political issues out of my direct control, but when I reread it this past weekend, I realized that the local level was more personal, frustrating, and depressing, as I experienced when

this past Saturday I attended my 10 year old daughter's soccer game. After listening to parents from both teams coach their children from the sidelines, I gently reminded them to act by the league's rules and not coach and call specific girls by name. Naively I thought this should be easy: there are good rules and they seem like nice people. While I was met by polite agreement, a few minutes later the same parents continued to do what they had been doing: coaching their kids from the sidelines. It was so sad for the capable and energetic girls who needed quiet admiration instead of picky critiques. Was my moral example enough? It didn't feel like it was (except perhaps for my daughter who heard what I had tried to do). No, I won't give up my moral critique; I just need to decide how best to proceed.

Ultimately what I am suggesting is that we must embrace this holiday – as humanist Jews – with realism and set attainable goals, and forgive ourselves if we do not meet all the goals we set. I am not implying that we cannot do what we need to do. Rather, from a humanist, philosophical point of view we must emphasize both the problems and opportunities. So – don't waste time, and prioritize, as we need to learn that we cannot do it all. I wish all of us good luck at we start the New Year.