

Next Tuesday and Wednesday we celebrate Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the new month. This month is Elul, the official beginning of our High Holiday season. Since the HHDs are a time of great personal reflection, we need some time to prepare ourselves before we stand before God asking for His forgiveness and His generosity. That time of preparation begins on Tuesday.

It's impossible to go back over every day of the last year and evaluate each of our actions and reactions. But we do have a way of guiding our reflections. That guidance comes from the prayers that we say throughout the HHD services. The words tell us what is expected of us and help us think about how to create a better life.

One of the most well known prayers that we say is Avinu Malkeynu. Not only are the words powerful but the melody is haunting.

Our Father, Our King, grant us compassion and answer us...

This prayer reminds us that God is not only our King, our one and only ruler, but also our parent. He is not a punishing parent but One who can give us compassion and comfort us. Just as God is compassionate with us, so we must be with ourselves during this period of preparation.

So many of us are afraid to look at our past behavior for fear we will feel overwhelmed by our transgressions. If we are too overwhelmed with guilt and regret, we will not take the time to find the ways to change. But if we begin this process of self reflection with compassion for ourselves, we will have a much easier time identifying our wrongdoings and looking for ways to do better.

The next prayer I want to talk about gives us a way to begin our reflection. This is the Vidui, the confessional prayer. It is an alphabetical listing of many of the things that we could do wrong. One of the most profound things about this prayer is that It's said in the plural: 'we have become guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed.' This plural form helps us remember that we are part of a larger community of people who also have missed the mark over the last year. There are always others who have done the same things that we have. While this certainly does not absolve us of wrong doing, it helps us put our actions into perspective. This again is another way of viewing our transgressions with compassion.

The last prayer I'll talk about that we can use to help us prepare for the HHDs is a refrain that we say throughout all three of our Holidays. After praying for a good year, we remind ourselves how we can create that. We are told that with repentance, prayer and righteous actions, we can create a life that is less selfish and more giving than we have now. We can recognize what we've done wrong, we can pray to make it right and we can give to others so that we can remember our humility.

This week's Torah portion, Re'eh, begins with a powerful statement said by Moses to the people Israel: 'See this, really absorb this information. Today I am setting before you a blessing and a curse, A blessing, if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God...And a curse, if you will not obey them...but turn aside to go after other gods.'

Tomorrow Marc will talk about some of those other gods and how we can turn away from them. Tonight we are given a clear example of what happens when we do follow God's commandments. We have a young man who is becoming a Jewish adult. He is standing before us, leading us in these prayers. Marc worked incredibly hard this past year to be able to do this. He studied the prayers so he would know their content. He studied his portion so that he would be able to teach us something important from

its words. And he told me this week that he's decided to continue in religious school next year, something that is not a requirement for a post Bar Mitzvah student.

So we know that when we obey God's commandments, when we learn and practice Judaism and when we teach it to our children, it strengthens not just the family and not just our congregation but the entire Jewish people.

As we begin our process of tshuvah, of recalling the last year and beginning to make right our wrongs, let us use this Bar Mitzvah to remind us of the benefits we reap when we make our lives more and more connected with Judaism.

Let us also use the very prayers we say on our HHDs to help us be compassionate with ourselves and with others. Let us know that we are never alone in our process of repenting. And let us know that we have the power to create a life that is a blessing to ourselves and to all others around us.

Shabbat Shalom.