

Next Wednesday, August 19th, we begin the month of *Elul*. While that month has no specific holiday, it is a time for us to prepare ourselves for the High Holidays. During *Elul*, we do a *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our soul. We look back over the last year to see what things we are proud of and want to continue and what things we would like to do differently. During this month we do *t'shuva*, repentance so that we arrive on *Rosh HaShana* prepared to stand before God, ready to be written into the Book of Life.

The *Chofetz Chaim*, Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohein, who lived in the 19th century in Poland, has a lot to teach us about repentance. He dedicated his life to writing and teaching about holy speech. He understood that just as God created the world with words, 'God spoke and the world came into being,' so too we create a world every time we speak. Whether that world is a holy one or not depends on what we say.

Here is what the *Chofetz Chaim* said about *t'shuva*.

"Do you know what *t'shuva* is—repentance? It is not, as many think, a matter of putting on sackcloth and sitting on the ground to wallow in suffering and self-punishment. With this approach we do not fulfill the requirement of *t'shuva*. The true way is for every one of us to repair and improve our own conduct in these areas, about those matters where we know we are faulty and flawed—every one of us according to our own...spiritual level.

"It is told that a cantor once came to see Rabbi Israel Salanter, the noted founder of the *musar* movement for ethical and moral self-education. 'Tell me rabbi,' the cantor asked. 'What is the particular *t'shuva* for me to do?'

"'You,' Rabbi Israel replied, 'should make every effort to be in good voice and sing superbly. That is what they are paying you for.'"

As the *Chofetz Chaim* says we do not have to wallow in suffering and self-punishment for our mistakes over the last year. Neither can we ignore the ways we have hurt others.

The way we can achieve *t'shuva* is to honestly assess our strengths and weaknesses, to honest look at our own actions and reactions. From that honest appraisal we can begin to make apologies to those we hurt.

But it's not enough to just look at our mistakes over the last year. We are told to take an accounting of our souls. What does that really mean?

We have to see exactly who we are in our very essence. We have to see the source of our own uniqueness.

There's a wonderful story about *Reb Zusya*, a *Hasid* from early 19th century Poland:

The students of *Reb Zusya* came to their teacher, who lay dying, trembling with fear.

The young students tried to comfort *Reb Zusya* saying, 'Why are you afraid? You have led such a good life. You have believed in God with a faith as strong as Abraham's. And you have followed the commandments as carefully as Moses.'

'Thank you. But this is not why I am afraid,' explained the rabbi. 'For if God should ask me why I did not act like Abraham, I can say that I was not Abraham. And if God asks me why I did not act like Rebecca or Moses, I can also say that I was not Rebecca or Moses.'

Then the rabbi said, 'But if God should ask me to account for the times when I did not act like *Zusya*, what shall I say then?'

How many of us can say that we always act like the best of ourselves? How many of us have taken the time to really know what that 'self' is?

Just as the *Chofetz Chaim* explained to the cantor the essence of his job, each one of us needs to discover our essence, the uniqueness of our own soul. It sounds so simple but it's not so easy. What does it really mean to be ourselves?

We often try to model ourselves after someone we admire. Or we were told as children to act like someone else. But we are not like anyone else. We are completely unique and it's important for us to know and appreciate that uniqueness.

During the month of Elul, each of us needs to find the time to examine who we are and find the parts of ourselves that we never knew were there, as well as to bring back those qualities which over the years we have lost or forgotten. It's never too late for us to change.

The more we can identify our uniqueness, the more open-heartedly we can stand on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, before God, our family and friends, praying to be written into the book of life and to have a good and sweet year.