

As we approach the High Holidays, we traditionally look back on the last year to see which of our behaviors we want to continue and which ones we want to change. As we make our Heshbon HaNefesh, our accounting of our souls it's helpful to look at the different kinds of relationships we can form with others.

Here are the three different ways we form a relationship.

The first type is where one person has more power in the relationship than the other. This person's feeling, thoughts and needs are the predominant focus of the relationship and both people work to satisfy that person. This is clearly a relationship of unequals.

The second type of relationship is a more equal one. Each person's feelings and thoughts are accepted and responded to. But the understanding of these feelings and thoughts are merely placed into already acknowledged contexts that each person brought into the relationship. There is no new ground being broken, no new understandings being reached.

The third type of relationship is more collaborative and creative. It takes the two existing realities and creates an entirely new one in which each person can continue to change and grow while respecting the other person's right to do the same. Neither person's identity is compromised but a larger reality is being created.

As we examine our human relationships, it's also a good time to look at our relationship with God. I hope you know that I am not talking about the image that many people have of a man dressed in white, sitting on a huge throne. We each have our understanding of God and all that matters is that we are aware that it exists.

The first type of relationship with God is the one-sided kind where God is the one with more power. This happens when we have some kind of a major holy experience in our lives. It may be caused by witnessing or experiencing a birth or death. It may be that we have an understanding that transforms our essential view of the world. It could feel like God paid us a visit to give us a message or a different understanding of how we can be in the world. In this one-sided relationship, we are transformed by God and certainly not the other way around.

An example of the two-sided relationship with God is our everyday experience. Feeling our heart beat, our eye lids flutter, our breath going in and out. We don't experience these events as separate from ourselves but we cannot make them happen by ourselves. They are part of the natural world that was created by God and is still connected to God. With these experiences we are partners with God. We could not be alive without God and God could not create breath and heart beats without us. We do not unite with God but we also are not overpowered by Him. We are two distinct but intimately connected realities.

The third kind of relationship, one that creates an entirely new reality between us and God was formed when the Torah was given and received and is still evolving thousands of years later. That event was an act of mutuality. Both partners met in the middle, God descending to Mount Sinai while Moshe climbed to meet Him. God gave Moshe the Law to give to the Jewish people and the people received it.

This code of law was given in a relatively brief form. But it was given with the understanding that it would be interpreted throughout the millennia by rabbis and sages. It was a creative endeavor between God and the Jews to create a third reality, a new way of being in the world.

This third reality is an even more astonishing accomplishment given that at no point in the history of the Jewish people have all the Jews followed all the laws. There have always been some Jews that have followed as many as possible and most that have not. Yet this code of law and the Jewish people have lasted for thousands of years.

As we prepare ourselves for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, reviewing our relationship with those people in our lives, let us also review our relationship with God and the Torah. Maybe it's time to make those relationships a more important part of our consciousness. Maybe it's time to connect with God and to connect with how our law is alive in our daily activities. God's law was never meant to dominate us or our thinking, it was meant to give us a way to be in the world that would be holy and righteous. At this time of year that sounds like a good idea for all of us.

Shabbat Shalom.