

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2014

How High are the High Holidays?

This summer an article about the High Holidays that I had skimmed in the past but never bothered to read, caught my attention. It was the title that grabbed me: “**How High are the High Holidays?**” I’ve often wondered about this phrase that we use in English when speaking about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur- *High Holidays*. In Hebrew we refer to the ten day period we are entering this evening and which ends with Yom Kippur, as the “Days of Awe” or “Yamim Nora’im.”

So where does the term High Holidays come from? I did a bit of research and discovered that it probably derives from the popular British phrase “high days and holidays” which refers to days of religious significance in the Christian calendar.

But the *real* reason that this article –**How High are the High Holidays**, caught my attention is because I read it around the same time that the marijuana dispensaries opened on the West Coast. You might remember the wide coverage this news received -including stories about tours taking people to sample different varieties of marijuana, much like wine enthusiasts sampling wines.

Some would say that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is indeed a *time to “get high.”* Not through chemicals or magical mantras but through an experience of prayer and music that hopefully helps us transcend the boundaries of mundane consciousness.

Rabbi James Diamond, author of this article about the High Holidays offers another reason for the origin of this term. He jokingly suggests that maybe the spelling of the word “High” is wrong. It should be “h-i” because on these days Jews who haven’t seen each other all year gather in synagogues to say ‘Hi’ !

But on a more serious note, I do think it’s important to consider the question the article poses: *How high are the High Holidays?* It’s a question that goes to the heart of what these days are all about: looking inward to reflect on where we are on our journey through life. **But even as we look inward, holding on to the term “high” in the name we give these holidays, reminds us to look upward, towards our loftiest capacities and aspirations.**

What are these aspirations? In a provocative piece unrelated to the High Holydays, David Brooks -the NY times columnist, writes about the distinction between living for our *resume* vs. living for our *eulogy*. The distinction he makes is helpful in understanding and sorting out our aspirations.

He challenges us to think about whether we are focusing on those aspirations that make for a good resume - like the skills we bring to the marketplace, or those that make for a good eulogy, like the nature of our relationships. Most of us would say that the *eulogy virtues* are indeed the more important ones. But are they the ones we think about most? Sadly, says Brooks - and most of us would agree with him, the answer is “no.”

On the High Holydays, however, our liturgy reminds us -over and over again, that our life on this earth is limited. Our liturgy forces us to think about the aspirations that matter most to us. This sense of urgency is purposely created by the High Holyday prayers to motivate us to focus on what Brooks would call eulogy or obituary virtues.

It brings to mind the story of a man who changed his life after reading his obituary. Sounds strange but it's actually a true story. It's the story of Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite and amassed his fortune producing explosives. When Nobel's brother died, a newspaper ran a long obituary of Alfred Nobel believing that it was he who had passed away. Nobel had an opportunity granted few people: to read his obituary while still alive. What he read horrified him: The newspaper described him as a man who had made it possible to kill more people more quickly than anyone else who had ever lived. At that moment, Nobel realized two things: that this was how he was going to be remembered and that this was *not* how he wanted to be remembered. And it was this chance event that gave rise to what we know today as the world's most famous set of awards, the Nobel Prizes. These prizes, which were created a century ago by Alfred Nobel are presented for outstanding achievement in literature, economics, medicine, the sciences and peace. Today everyone is familiar with the Nobel Prize while relatively few people know how Nobel made his fortune.

Thinking about how our obituary might read is a valuable thought experiment because it reminds us of the values that really matter to us. No obituary ever praises someone for being too busy at work to find time for their children, for having the most beautiful home or for taking exotic vacations. The people who are most mourned are not the richest or the most famous, or the most successful. They are people who enhanced the lives of others. They were kind, they were loving, they had a sense of their responsibilities; they were loyal friends and committed members of communities.

Today, we have before us a precious opportunity, not entirely dissimilar to the opportunity afforded Alfred Nobel. Ahead of us are ten days of reflection; a time we should use wisely to consider the values that are most important to us and the ways in which we have failed to live out these values. Hopefully we will have not only this coming year but many more years ahead of us to express these values in our relationships, at work, at home, and in our communities.

And as we reflect on our shortfalls, let us remember that our tradition insists on second chances, on our ability to change and re-write, as it were, the story of our life. To borrow another term from the High Holydays: the "book of life" is not sealed until the very end. Every year, every day is a chance to do better. This is the gift and the power of *t'shuvah*, of turning towards our most elevated selves.

Tonight we begin this ten-day period. We could go through the motions and remain unchanged. But then the gap that exists for most of us - be it narrow or wide, between the life we want and the one that we are living will remain unchanged.

So I urge us to hold on to the "High" in these High Holydays and to re-connect with our highest selves. May these forthcoming High Holidays be *elevating* for all of us. Shanah tova.

