

Yom Kipur 2010

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every year on Yom Kipur, Jews list their errors and determine to be better. But you and I know that most of us are unlikely to change very much, if at all.

The religious bigot is going to stay a bigot. The Chasid will not turn into a Litvak. The hardliner will not become soft, nor will the man who always says "no" change his tune. The crook will not willingly hand back his ill gotten gains. The day after Yom Kipur all the instruments will, in the main, continue to play the same tune.

Sometimes I wonder if the answer might not lie in the old anti-Semitic joke: What is the difference between a Christian and Jew approaching the Pearly Gates of Heaven when they die? The Christian expects to be found guilty and sentenced to suffer for an eternity in the hell fires of perdition. The Jew, on the other hand, expects to be let off, with costs. It's the "with costs", of course, that is anti-Semitic. But the attitude with which the pious Jew (and the not so pious) approaches his or her Maker is indeed one of confidence. It is like a spoilt son who knows his mother will always love and forgive him so he can get away with absolutely everything. So yes, we do, rather confidently, expect God to forgive us. That's our excuse and, in my view, it is a much healthier response than guilt and depression.

The God of the Bible does not ask us to change, just to try to follow His commands (which He hopes will keep us on the straight and narrow). If we do wrong, we are expected to confess, desist and atone. But there is no specific command in the Holy Writ to repent. It is true Rambam says there a Biblical command to repent, but the text he uses to justify his minority opinion is not at all obvious. At face reading in the Bible, teshuva, like reward and punishment, seems to be a national issue rather than a personal one.

I suggest it is only in a post-Greek philosophical world of individual morality that teshuva becomes important. Despite my cynicism, many of us do change—some more and some less. But what gets us to change is usually some crisis, whether it is the loss of someone we love, surviving an accident, or some major upheaval in our life. All the time there are forces beyond our control influencing our lives. This is why so many are superstitious. It is their only way of pretending they can protect themselves from the unknown.

Our lives are influenced, if not determined, by government policies. Do we know if they get it right over stimulation packages? Did the measures taken to deal with the economic crisis really work? Will reigning in banks make all of us poorer or richer? Did they make things better or worse? Even the experts cannot agree. For years, governments have been tinkering with education, social security, and health. They spend billions, reform, change, add, reduce, modify, close loopholes. But things do not seem to get better. Perhaps governments simply guess. But we rely on them. They tax us, but what

can we do? We treat them as a kind of god. We put our trust in them and hope they get it right more often than not. But what we do is to just carry on, day in day out, year in year out, and hope that things work out right.

Isn't it this why we have Yom Kipur? What do we have some measure of control over? Only how we live, the quality of our own lives. If we make materialism the overriding consideration we will feel good or bad according to how much money we have. But if we value other factors like relationships, healing others, then we can derive pleasure from life regardless of how small our bank balances are.

Yom Kipur therefore is not simply about asking for forgiveness or even about change. It is about value, trying to live a more meaningful life. The advantage of having a way of life is not that it guarantees anything. Nothing can. But it helps give structure and guidance. Being physically fit doesn't guarantee you won't be shot by a crazy gunman. But it does enable you to run away from trouble if you get the chance.

Being religious does not guarantee your being a good person, but you have a handy template if you choose to try to be one. Much of our characters and natures are influenced by family, friends, education, and circumstance. Change is indeed difficult and that is why our tradition keeps on hammering away at it.

If you look at the people who haven't changed it is like looking at how many enemies we have. That will only depress you and inhibit action. But if you focus on the possibility of trying to improve, of survival, and you see that both are possible, this gives one hope and this is what will give one the impetus to make a better job of it next year. It's the trying that counts.

I suggest that God does not really ask for immediate change, for repentance overnight. He is, so He says, slow to anger, merciful, and allows us to change slowly in our own way and time. That is why we feel less fearful of what awaits us.