

Ritual and Custom: On *Teshuvah* and *Tashlich*

My New Year's message to the congregation this year focuses on two important aspects of the High Holy Day period: ritual and custom. During the *Yamim Noraim* both of these aspects – Ritual and Custom – are necessary to our High Holy Day experience in order for us to be completely spiritually satisfied when the High Holy Days come to a close. In other words, just like in the old Sinatra song, you can't have one without the other, ritual and custom go together 'like a horse and carriage'.

When it comes to the fundamental rituals of the High Holy Days, it is prayer that takes center stage: we recite certain prayers over and over from Selichot through Yom Kippur, and certain words become like mantras. The word "*Teshuvah*" must trip off our tongues more times than any other single word, although I haven't actually counted and *Chet*, loosely translated as 'sin' or 'wrongdoing', probably is in the running, too. The word "*Teshuvah*" is usually translated as "Repentance" or "Seeking forgiveness". And we are told in countless ways in our *Mahzor's tefillot*, that through "repentance" we will be inscribed in the Book of Life, *Sefer Ha'Chaim*. Of course, don't forget: it's just an annual reprieve. We have to go through the same process of *Teshuvah* next year, and the next, and the next. Oh, and by the way, we also are told that "*Teshuvah*" alone isn't actually enough: we need *Tefillah* (prayer) and *Tzedakah* (charity) to "*Maavirin et Roa Ha'Gezerah*", to 'avert the severe decree'.

The High Holy Day rituals of repetitive recitation of prayers mentioning *Teshuvah* actually cause us to think about guess what? Yes, *Teshuvah*. By the time we finish *Neilah* on Yom Kippur, we have recited the *Al Chet* so many times we can't not think about our wrongdoings during the previous year. In fact, with each repetition of the very words, '*V'al chet*' at the beginning of each line, we move into a mental reverie of our own '*chets*'. The recitation of certain prayers and repetition of certain words over and over during the High Holy Days, create a ritualistic aspect to our experience. And the music that accompanies these recitations also enhances the ritualizing, for we recognize the tunes, the melodies from previous High Holy Days. Both the prayers and their melodies are only recited during this period and that makes them unique and contributes to our experience of High Holy Day ritual.

Another obvious ritual that is associated solely with the High Holy Days, of course, is the blowing of the Shofar. In last month's column I wrote about the daily ritual of blowing the Shofar during the month of Elul. By the time we get to the two days of Rosh Hashana, we have a complete Shofar service during the middle of the Torah service with lots of shofar blowing and the Shofar is blown again during the three sections of the *Musaf: Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot*. The final 'clarion call' occurs at the very end of *Neilah*, the final evening service of Yom Kippur, when we hear a final "*Tekiah Gedolah*". We are spiritually satisfied through these rituals.

In addition, to the rituals, however, over the centuries, customs have been adopted in many communities to enhance the experience of ritual and deepen the spiritual satisfaction derived from the High Holy Days. Some customs are food-oriented, such as a round *Challah*, the emblem of whole and complete, celebrating the New Year; or the eating of apples and honey, a food symbol for a 'Sweet New Year'. But perhaps the most

meaningful custom of all is the custom of *Tashlich*, casting away (of sins). This ceremony, dating back to the fifteenth century, and not commanded in the Bible, is a custom, a *Minhag*, that many of us have participated in since our childhoods. The custom is to stand near a body of water, preferably a river, and throw bread crumbs into the water as a gesture of casting away our wrongdoings so that we may begin the new year with a clean slate. A beautiful and spiritual ceremony, *Tashlich* still has meaning for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some six hundred years after it first came into being. This year, we are reviving the *Tashlich* experience and I am re-envisioning the custom for our 21<sup>st</sup> century Congregation B'nai Jacob. We will celebrate **Tashlich on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, downtown Jersey City on-the-Hudson**. It will be a letting go ceremony to commemorate our individual and collective commitment to moving on and creating positive change in our personal lives. Perhaps this year's ceremony will serve to remind us as a congregation of the fact that we as a community are in changing times and that some letting go is in order to make room for our future. Our decision to hold *Tashlich* on the Sunday following Yom Kippur makes perfect sense. While the traditional day for *Tashlich* is often the first day of Rosh Hashanah, it is permissible to observe *Tashlich* up through Hoshanah Rabbah, just before Shemini Atzeret. Now, the day after Yom Kippur we will truly begin our new year unencumbered with a great hope for the days ahead. I wish everyone a *Shana Tova U'Metukah*, a Good and Sweet Year!