



Cantor's Message, September/October 2008 To Atone, or Not to Atone? That is the Question.

The High Holy Days come late this year. The first day of Rosh Hashanah is not until September 30th. That gives us an especially long period of time to reflect upon the year soon to be behind us and the year ahead. 5768 will soon be 5769. Hard to believe, but the annual cycle of holidays are about to begin once again, just as, for those of us who are in shul on Shabbat morning know, we are in the middle of the last of the Five Books of Moses, Sefer D'Varim, Deuteronomy, and we soon will be reciting once again Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning...'

The award-winning singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell wrote a lyric many decades ago that now has become a staple of the pop repertoire, recorded by many artists, called, 'The Circle Game'.

The lyric begins:

*Yesterday a child came out to wander
Caught a dragonfly inside a jar
Fearful when the skies began to rumble
And tearful at the falling of a star
Then the child moved ten times round the seasons
Skated over ten clear frozen streams
Words like "When your older" must appease him
And promises of someday making his dreams.*

Refrain:

*And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return,
We can only look behind from where we came
And go round and round in the circle game.*

For those unfamiliar with this song, the verses go on to describe the passages of a young boy through childhood, teenage years and young adulthood. Mitchell speaks in the final verse of the dreams having lost some 'grandeur coming true', but she ends the last verse with the following nod to optimism, "There'll be new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty, before the last revolving year is through". The song ends with the final phrase of the refrain, "Round and round and round in the circle game".

This song, with its haunting melody, was one of my favorite songs as a college student and in my early twenties. So much of life was ahead of me then. I sang and strummed my guitar in coffee-houses and cabarets and 'The Circle Game' was one song I never left out of a performance. It spoke to me then, and the words still speak to me now some many decades later, for they have the ring of the Jewish calendar annual cycle of torah readings and holiday observances with the reference to 'the carousel of life' and 'round and round'. Presumably, each year we are not simply older, but wiser. 'We can't return, we can only look behind from where we came' and in so doing, we have before us the gift of reflection, looking back and then, adjusting, and shaping 'new dreams, maybe better dreams, and plenty, before the last revolving year is through'.

So now our time of reflection is upon us. We enter the month of Elul exactly on Labor Day this year, September 1. Our Jewish and secular calendars are 'star-crossed' and it is beshert because we all have the opportunity now to regard the entire month of September as our period of Teshuvah, our time of Repentance according to our Jewish tradition. By way of reminder, beginning on Rosh Hodesh, we blow the shofar at the conclusion of morning services and we recite Psalm 27: "Adonai is my light and salvation: Of whom shall I be afraid?" It is traditional to recite Selichot, penitential prayers during the month. The Sephardic tradition begins this practice on Rosh Hodesh Elul while the Ashkenzic tradition starts closer to Rosh Hashana. The traditional Selichot services are held after Shabbat on Saturday night. This year, Selichot services fall on September 20, actually two Saturday nights before Rosh Hashana. At that service we hear for the first time many of the prayers and melodies of the High Holy Day season.

This year, from September 1 until September 20th, there are almost three weeks, 20 days, leading up to the Selichot service. During this time, I'm asking each of you to spend some time in reflection about your relationships with others - family, friends, coworkers - and also your relationship with God. The question is not, 'Do you have anything to atone for?', since, given our imperfections as human beings, we all have something to atone for. The question is "Are you willing to atone?" Put more precisely, are you willing to place yourself in a state of mindful reflection long enough to actually recall the year, your deeds and misdeeds, and take stock of your successes and failures in all aspects of your relationships with others, with yourself, and with God? Thus, it's not a case of whether there's anything to atone for, but rather whether or not we are willing to place ourselves in a vulnerable context and are willing to uncover and acknowledge our failings and then, and only then to atone, to seek repentance. We come to atonement at the end of a process of mindful reflection and consideration. To atone, or not to atone?: that is the question. The answer lies in our decision to be willing, to be willing to recognize our failings and to do something about them.

This coming year - 5769 - Congregation B'nai Jacob will celebrate its 50th Anniversary. There are many special programs planned and you will see information about them in this month's website. Be sure to reserve the weekend of November 21 and 22 when we will be celebrating our 50th with a special Shabbat beginning with a Friday Night Live! Musical service, Saturday morning services with a festive Kiddush, and culminating with Saturday night Havdalah and an exciting Benefit Gala Dinner Dance, "A Night for Celebration", honoring our founding members and long-term devotees of Congregation B'nai Jacob, Sid and Jane Canter. Be sure to tell all your friends and family members about this terrific series of events planned for B'nai Jacob's 50th!

May this holiday season bring many blessings to you and yours. I wish everyone a Shana Tovah U'Metuka!

Cantor Marsha Dubrow Ph. D.
cantor@bnaijacobjc.org
201-910-4334

©2008, Cantor Marsha Dubrow