Thought Tools

A Balancing Act

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7th day of Tishrei,
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I once had someone working for me in sales. He was the hardest worker I knew. He produced the nicest sales graphs—by the dozen. He drew colored charts of projections—by the dozen. But he never managed to make any sales. He was always busy; he just wasn’t doing what he had to do when he had to do it.

Ancient Jewish wisdom offers an annual antidote to this common human failing. Many Jews will crowd into synagogues this Friday night and Saturday for Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement brings more Jews to worship services than any other occasion. Even Jews who reveal themselves in public opinion surveys to be among the least religious of all Americans show up at synagogue on Yom Kippur. There are some Jews for whom this day has become a ceremony marking the passage of time; a sort of Jewish Labor Day announcing the end of summer.

For others, Yom Kippur is the social event of the year at which they get to see old acquaintances. Other Jews attend high holyday services propelled by guilt and as a last lingering contact with a Judaism that sentimentally links them to their parents and grandparents.

However, there is greater significance to Yom Kippur than these secular, social and sentimental motivations. This special day celebrates one of God’s greatest gifts without which no society could long survive. This is the schematic of order and structure. Without it our love of personal liberty would tip us toward civil chaos. Our society flourishes in its diversity. Some of us specialize in providing food; others offer medical care. Someone drives the bus or plane you ride, while other individuals build companies. We can vote, dress and live in totally different ways than our peers. Within the...
magical environment we call a society each of us can flourish in whatever areas we choose. But with all this personal liberty some basic common framework must exist. Without a shared vision for how society ought to look, one person’s liberty to do that which he chooses soon begins to impinge on another’s ability to live his chosen life. Perhaps someone’s choice is not to work at all or to turn to drugs or alcohol. Well that choice impacts everyone as they are forced to hand over money they would rather spend on their own family or step over an intoxicated form on the sidewalk. It is almost impossible to make choices that do not impact other people. We are all interconnected. This produces a tension between personal liberty which we embrace and the need for us all to choose to curtail some of our liberties. A great secret for both family and business success is learning to balance what we want to do with what we should do. The Jewish High Holydays, comprising Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, impart the theme of that great balancing act and link it to the astrological sign of this period; Libra, the balancing scales. The challenge not only for individuals but for society as a whole is to master this balancing act. When better to attempt it than during the Month of the Scales? Perhaps one spiritual reason that Jews flock to services during these days of awe is to acknowledge that living successfully means accepting restraints. For a society to survive every right has a matching responsibility; every freedom entails an obligation. We all need to do what we have to do, when we have to do it. We need help in setting the right balance in our lives because if enough people make bad choices, it ruins society for everyone. A connection with God helps us balance our desire to do that which we please with our ability to resist that desire in favor of what is right. And that can be a powerful magnet for gathering people together once a year. While the Day of Atonement is a Jewish holyday, many of its themes can benefit everyone. If you would like to explore this day’s value for you, you will appreciate my audio CD, Day for Atonement: Heavenly Gift of Spiritual Serenity.

Susan's Musings

This week’s musing - Dragons in Experts' Clothing

Gazing at their newborns, most parents are ready to slay evil ogres and behead fire-breathing dragons to keep their precious new baby safe. Unfortunately, over the years, the perils facing their child will rarely appear in such easily recognizable forms. Instead they will often be cloaked in convincingly written articles and sincere professional advice. How many young mothers today shake their heads condescendingly...

You have said that numbers are very important in the scriptures. Does God use the base ten numbering system (why 40, 8, 7, 3, etc.)?

Thank you,
David P.

See Rabbi Lapin’s Answer

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