

Hannah Heller

Dvar Torah – Rosh Hashanah – September 10, 2010

For the past six years, I have observed two Yahrzeits back to back. My husband, Craig Heller, died on the 29th of Av in 2002 and my mother, Jeannette Fruchter, died the following year on the 30th of Av. For two years, I participated in a bereavement group.

After the last meeting of the group, I came home to find my kids on the couch deeply engaged in watching TV. I looked at the TV and saw Donald Trump with a few people around a table having an argument. When I asked Gila and Elliot what was going on, they told me all about the TV show called “The Apprentice.” About 16 people compete for a job working for Donald Trump. Divided into two teams, the contestants sell a product or service or make a presentation and are judged by business executives. The losing team goes into the board room where they argue about whose fault it was, ending with Donald Trump’s eliminating a contestant by saying, “You’re fired.”

Something happened that night when I looked at the TV. I became engaged in this show with my kids. In the following weeks and months, we watched the show together, sharing lots of laughs about some of the craziness that goes on in reality shows and some of the business lessons we learned from Donald Trump. All week we discussed whom we liked, whom we disliked and who would be the next to go. We decided that we would not answer the phone during this show, as it had become part of our special family time.

Regardless of one’s opinion of “The Apprentice” or any other reality TV show, or, for that matter, watching TV in general, I make note of this show to illustrate a change that can happen in one’s life. Having dealt with family illnesses and deaths, Gila, Elliot and I decided that it was time to laugh again. The night that I became intrigued by a show they were watching was the night that we, without really thinking about it, decided that life could go on and it was not too late to find laughter, joy and happiness in being together. Every season we continue to watch the show and discuss it, as it has so much personal meaning to us as a family.

The upcoming season of “The Apprentice” will feature candidates who have been laid off from high level jobs. Each of them is determined to regain his or her status and maintain a positive self image while facing the job market on national TV. They refuse to give up and continue to strive for success in spite of our tough economic times.

The message of this time of year is that, no matter what you are trying to accomplish, whether it's a new job or another goal, it's never too late. On the High Holy Days, we not only reflect on the past year, but we also look to what lies ahead. If we didn't accomplish what we had hoped to one year ago, do we give up and say it can't be done? If we faced a major catastrophe or setback, do we consider it impossible to start over?

Last year we went through the month of Elul, blew the shofar, spent all those hours in shul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and yet here we are doing it all over again. Is it more of the same old thing? Whatever age we are and whatever challenges we have, do we give up and say we can't change?

Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss of Staten Island notes that the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination) looks for a golden opportunity this time of year. He relates that it's human nature to feel defeated and overwhelmed. When we despair of ever changing our ways, when we think it's too late to return to G-d, the Yetzer Hara has won. Consider our forefathers and foremothers who achieved greatness late in life.

Just 7 weeks ago, we observed Tisha B'Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, remembering a time in our history when we felt discouraged and abandoned. Then we reach the month of Elul, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and we begin again to channel our energies towards self improvement as we re-establish our relationship with G-d.

Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer relates that during the Ten Days of Repentance (Aseret Yimei Teshuvah), it is as if we are on trial. Yet most trials deal with determining responsibility for past deeds. This one, however, has an added dimension of looking toward what can be done about future deeds. The verdict is determined by our attitudes and by our attempts to change ourselves.

Rabbi Michael Taubes, Co-Editor of the Art Scroll Machzor, discusses the dispute regarding whether prayer is biblically mandated or merely a rabbinical law. Rambam (Maimonides) says that we are required by the Torah to pray, and the details of how often and how much were added later. Ramban (Nachmanides) says that prayer comes strictly from the rabbis.

What is significant about this dispute? The commentators all agree that the Torah mandates prayer during times of special anguish. When there is famine, war and sickness, the Torah obligates us to pray and cry out to G-d. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that even Rambam agrees with this and it all depends on what is considered to be a time of an *Et Tzarah*, a time of trouble and great anguish.

Rambam takes this in a broader fashion, by saying that we should recognize every day as an *Et Tzarab*, a time of great need. We are dependent on G-d's blessing to be able to function daily. We can't take one step without G-d wanting us to do so. So much goes on in the human body to make it work properly, and we need to pray to G-d for the ability to survive and maintain our health.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are even greater times of *Et Tzarab*. Our Creator is judging us and determining our fate for the coming year.

We don't recite Hallel on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we recognize the seriousness of these holy days. Hallel is for celebrations, expressing praise and joy to G-d for bringing us to happy times. While this is not appropriate for High Holy Days and the mood here is more serious, we should not lose sight of the need to rejoice on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as well as on other holidays. When someone dies, the shiva week is truncated for these holidays.

Rosh Hashanah is known as Yom Teruah, a day of sounding the shofar. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that Teruah is related to the word Re'ah, meaning friend. When Bilaam's plan to curse the Jews is turned into a blessing by G-d, Bilaam notes in despair that G-d is a friend to the Jews. While we may be nervous about entering the Day of Judgment, as we continue to pray, we become more comfortable and we rekindle our holy relationship with our Creator.

During this time of year, we also recite the prayer "LiDavid Hashem Ori." In this prayer, we have the words "*Sheevtee Beivait Hashem Kol Yimai Chayaii Lachazot Binoam Hashem Ulivaker Behaichalov*". King David expresses his desire to "dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the pleasantness of the Lord and to visit in His sanctuary."

The word "*Sheevtee*" means to dwell in the house permanently, while the word "*Livaker*" means to visit. King David expresses the desire to stay in the house of G-d, yet still have the freshness and the excitement of someone who is visiting for the first time. When we see a new place, we have a lot of excitement. After a while, the newness wears off and it becomes the same old routine. King David wants to be a person who dwells in the house of G-d, but treats every day with the energy of someone who is seeing it for the first time.

In his book Living on the Edge, Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser describes our view of the world as through glass. If you look through a glass window, you see others. If you cover that glass with silver, then you have a mirror and you see only yourself. We need to look out to the needs of others and not be blinded by silver and other material items solely for our own benefit.

Rabbi Steven Wernick, Executive Vice President of The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, illustrates that our lives have meaning when G-d is in the center. The English word “Life” has the word “if” in the center. However, its Hebrew counterpart, “Chaim”, has two yuds, representing G-d’s name.

If we live according to Jewish tradition, caring about ourselves, our fellow human beings and our environment, we have G-d in the center. We don’t just exist in a life, we live in Chaim, a life that is both healthy and fulfilling.

I look forward to the new season of The Apprentice and wish all of the contestants the best of success. More importantly, though, I pray that all of us will be inscribed in the Book of Life, of Chaim, and that we will achieve happiness, health, fulfillment and peace in the coming year. Shanah Tova and Kiteeva Vi chateema Tova.