

Reward or Obligation

Moral Contemplations for the High Holidays

by HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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So, here we are again. Every year we follow the New Year rituals. We get dressed up, we act so righteous and pious. We pray and go through all the regular routines and come through it all feeling as if we have actually somehow impressed G-d and influenced Him to change the way He looks at us.

But have we really influenced Heaven? Are we so sure that our pious activity during these days will secure for us the blessings of life, limb and property that is so important to us? How many of us can say without a doubt in absolute surety that their actions and behavior during the High Holiday period is surely going to get G-d to do as one asks, if not demands?

After all we spend good money on those new clothing. We donate hefty amounts of cash to the Synagogue and other religious institutions. We go to Synagogue and sit there for hour during what for most are long and boring prayers. We give a lot and suffer a lot. Heaven had better take notice, and pay us back in like-kind for all that we have given. It is, after all, only fair, isn't it?

While almost no one will admit that this is how they feel or think, almost everyone does, regardless of their denials. For the most part, in most people's eyes, G-d is some kind of magical "Santa Claus" whose job it is to give us all nice treats and presents because "we have been sooooo good!" I pity the fool whose insights into spirituality and religion are so shallow that all they can think about is what they can get out of it.

A number of years ago, President John Kennedy of the U.S.A. said to his countrymen, "ask not what your country can do for you, but rather ask what can you do for your country." Well, at this time, I would like to ask you a similar question, "ask not what G-d can do for you, but rather ask, what can you do for G-d?"

Herein lies the dilemma, most individuals never think about what they can do for G-d and how they can advance the agenda of Heaven. Almost everyone is far too interested in themselves, in their own petty little problems and concerns and seek from G-d only that which concerns them personally. Most people ask what they have to do in order to get G-d to do what they want. Most are willing to give something to G-d, but on condition that G-d in turn gives back to them what it is that they want. But how many of us actually give to G-d simply because it is the right thing to do, without any ulterior motive for reward?

Doing the right thing should be its own reward. We give to G-d when we ourselves become agents of Heaven. We become this when we act and live properly in accordance to the proper course of righteousness as defined for us by the Torah and Bible. Giving to G-d is not some nebulous, spiritual or mystical thing. Giving to G-d is giving to one another, providing balance and harmony to our societies and to our world at large. Giving to G-d means to provide, it means to give. It

does not mean to give in order to receive in return. It means to give for giving's sake alone, period.

G-d is the ultimate Giver. He is the Source of all. Therefore, everything is already technically His and in Him. We cannot really give anything to G-d in any direct sense. But Heaven has never asked of us anything of this kind in a long time. Instead of animal sacrifices, Heaven instead wants from us the sacrifice of our efforts, our toil and our commitment to one another, to make our world at large a better place to live in.

This is how we give to G-d. This is how we serve G-d and this is how we surrender to G-d, by putting the needs of the many before the needs of the few or of the one (oneself). G-d is the ultimate Giver. Those who wish to embrace the Divine Image in which we are created must also become altruistic givers, as much as is humanly possible.

For most the High Holiday period is a social event, welcomed or dreaded or occasionally both. So much emphasis is placed on externals that the true inner essence is often lost and forgotten altogether. And somehow, in some twisted way, these shallow and empty individuals believe and even demand that their superficial show of piety acted out like a "on stage" performance should be acceptable in the eyes of G-d as if it were the real thing! Who amongst us is so damned-dimwitted to believe that they are actually fooling G-d? Unfortunately, the answer is that most shallow individuals really are this stupid!

The High Holidays are no social event. Rosh HaShana is our day in court before the True Judge. Yom Kippur is the day when any appeals are handed down. If any of us were to be required to make an appearance in any court of law here on Earth, and stand before either judge, magistrate or jury, we would make sure that the last things we look and act like is an "ass." Yet, we take no such precautions when we stand before the True Heavenly Court. Before the True Judge, many indeed look like "asses" and not like sincere and remorseful human beings.

Why should G-d not treat us like unclean animals if and when we ourselves do not act differently? There is an ancient teaching that states, "G-d judges us in accordance to how we act towards others and ourselves." So, therefore, the secret to standing before the True Judge and receiving a decent verdict is simple. Judge and treat yourself and others fairly, with righteousness and dignity and in turn Heaven will look upon you with righteousness and dignity. Act humanely towards others and Heaven will act humanely towards you. How more simple can this get?

A lot of bad things will happen during this coming year, these cannot be avoided. But this does not mean that such things have to happen to you! You can definitely make a difference, all you have to do is be real! Stop being shallow. Stop showing off! Stop trying to impress others or be better than them!

Start by being sincere. Start by reaching out to others in any way and in every way you can. Instead of marveling over that new dress or suit that you bought to make yourself look good in Synagogue over the Holidays, try instead to donate an equal if not larger amount of money that you spent on your new clothes to help others buy new clothes or other needs that the less fortunate might have.

Remember, we are G-d's "hands" here on Earth. G-d likes to look down and see that His "hands" are clean. He doesn't like to look down from Heaven and see dirt. What He sees will be up to us. Heaven sees what is really there, beyond all our self-deceptions and shallowness. G-d sees our true souls for the cleanliness or filth that is really there. And G-d judges according to the truth of

the matter. No one and I repeat no one, however great or small, religious or secular, scholar, sage or layman will ever impress G-d with external, superficial performances of righteous piety. G-d sees through these facades and judges according to the shallowness of the individual and their blatant attempt to fool Heaven. Act like an "ass" and you will be treated like one.

We have a difficult year ahead of us, but we can make things easier for ourselves. Now is the time to prepare, to give and to give until it hurts. Money is only one thing to give, donating one's time to help others is another. There are so many ways that we can make life better for one another. It should not be too hard to figure out what we can do to properly help one another. When we do so, then G-d gazes upon "clean hands" and is pleased.

We cannot save our world, but we can work hard to save ourselves and those around us. This is not "rocket-science." So, get to work. Prepare for difficult times to come. Look after one another. Act humanely and remember the great "eleventh commandment," thou shalt not act like an ass. Instead, thou shalt truly be human, in sincerity, in heart, in righteous deeds and actions, in properly looking after ourselves and others. In this we please G-d and solicit for ourselves Divine Favor.

This is our moral and religious obligation. Only in this is reward. We do what is right simply because it is the right thing to do. G-d sees this and "smiles." In this is reward, salvation and closeness to G-d. May we all merit it. Shana Tova to all.

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