

Rabbi's Reflections:           Hurry Up and Slow Down

Sometimes, especially in fall and spring, observant Jews feel like they are crazy. *Pesah* in spring requires tremendous time and picayune procedures. In fall we have, in Diaspora, two days of *Rosh Hashanah*, one day of *Yom Kippur*, seven days of *Sukkot*, two days of *Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah*, for twelve days out of the month, plus *Shabbat*. Thus every year the classic joke is whether to recite *shehecheyanu* (blessing thanking God that we have reached this occasion) at the end of *Simhat Torah*.

We wonder why God, who is not nuts, and Jews, who usually are intelligent, fill the first third of the month with heavyweight holidays full of life and death, sin and repentance, too much food and too little food, expensive clothes, etc. Then comes a breather of five days (which I have yet to see) during which we build a *sukkah* (booth), and buy a *lulav* and *etrog* (palm branch and citron) set. Next comes a week of living in the contraption we built—singing in the rain, the snow, and, thank God, sometimes sunshine; eating soup with leaves, chicken with leaves, cake with leaves—often pine as this is Thanksgiving, smile and be grateful. Subsequently, on *Shemini Atzeret*, we pray for rain (in which we sat on *Sukkot*). Finally, we dance with the *Torah* (those things are heavy, our bodies ache, and we are to be joyful on our last legs?).

What does this mean? The answer is to be joyful anyway, thankful nonetheless. Thanksgiving sacrifices will not be abolished in the days of *mashi-ah*, the messiah (*Leviticus Rabbah*). Gratitude always is necessary to enter into a serious relationship with God (Deuteronomy; Kaplan). According to the Kotzker Rebbe (Menahem Mendel, early 19<sup>th</sup> century), joyfulness is a by-product of holiness, so it is natural to be joyful after being purified of sin, and thereby sanctified. Yet this is what is so hard to do.

I am convinced the calendar teaches us a lesson. The joy of *Sukkot* and the looseness of *Simhat Torah* balance the tensions of the High Holidays. If we live on just the High Holidays, we live a Judaism full of high anxiety and piercing trauma. Judaism is much more: it also is full of intense joy, deep relaxation, and sincere gratitude. I urge you to step off the fast track of life, and discover what you are missing by not moving slowly through life, where we define ourselves by our work, school, and money. Instead, enter the left lane of this High Holiday season that actually teaches you to change to the right lane and appreciate what is around you, to learn to share, be grateful, and enjoy life.

My teacher, Neil Gillman tells this story of once daydreaming in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's early Monday morning class. Heschel: "Did you see the trees on Riverside Drive this morning?," knowing full well that he had not left the building. "The trees on Riverside Drive are wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries). After class, you will go to the Drive, take the *tefillin* from the trees, and bring them to me." After class, accompanied by his classmates, Neil Gillman dutifully marched up to the Drive and looked at the trees. At each twig's tip, he noticed a small brown curlicue, a prelude to the leaves which would emerge. They did look like *tefillin*, and he brought them back to Rabbi Heschel. So take some time, be thankful, and appreciate what *Sukkot* teaches us.