

*Rosh Ha-shanah* Day One 5768/2007

A stingy farmer grew resentful of the cost of feeding his plow horse. "Every day he consumes precious oats and hay. Starting tomorrow," he promised his wife, "I'll eliminate his oats."

A month later, satisfied with the savings on oats, he realized he could accustom the horse to even less food by gradually decreasing the quantity of hay he fed the horse each day. After three months, the now emaciated animal received only a few wisps of fodder a day.

"Look," he cried excitedly to his wife, "all we have to do now is to cut out his hay entirely and in no time it won't cost us a penny to keep him."

But the horse soon died.

"*Oy vay iz mir!*" he wept, "of all the rotten luck! Here I had that horse accustomed to going without any food at all, and it had to go and die!"

This old, sick joke contains two basic characters: the stingy farmer and his plow horse. In the process of making money, the farmer forgets the basic relationship with the horse as he lightens the animal's diet. While he pursues profit by making things lite, he destroys the fundamentals of the relationship.

I thought we were through with the "Lite Decade" almost twenty years ago. Instead, we see more and more lite. What started as a marketing ploy for dietetic foods and for drinking three beers for the caloric count of two has become part of a larger phenomenon in which less is more. I feel like my kids, first pediatrician. He was in his sixties back then. I asked him how he could run an office where no two people practice medicine the same way. He answered that he's been around long enough to see fads come and go, and come and go, and return for a third round. We still have lite beers and lite foods. We still have lite politics where the candidate's image is more important than the issues; lite responsibility where voter participation keeps going down; lite shopping where we buy clothes not only by T.V., but on the Internet. Lite is now what we seek in life. In the 1980s, the "Lite Decade," we thought everybody was selfish, wanting easy cures, easy riches, easy jobs, and easy wealth. In other words, I want it all now; gain with no pain. Accordingly, relationships became lite. It was the "Me generation."

Not much has changed. I figure the Internet makes us even less able to face people. Look at the surge of Facebook and its ilk. We think we're more connected with people than ever, yet the more time we spend, the

less we see them. We chat more about the latest break-up, at least both Hollywood and friends, yet we don't actually give our friends a shoulder on which to cry, a pat, a hug, and actually ask them how they're doing and wait for an answer. Maybe that's true of marriages as well. For a couple of decades now more than half the marriages end in divorce. Not only don't we want to work at it, but we do better with our car, a beer, a gourmet frozen food entre, a dollar than we do with a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend. We do better with a "what" than a "who." Contrast this with French biographer Andre Maurois, wonderful sentence, "A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day." Each day brings tension, trouble, pain and exhaustion. Yet communication yields a chance to express feelings to a listening ear that, while also tired and preoccupied, presents an unrivaled opportunity to build another person.

Relationships with children haven't changed much. I grew up in a house where people used to drop by all the time, unannounced. Kids would come home from college and crash at our house before going home. I just spoke with a woman who tells me the same thing happens to her. She's even had people stay for weeks at a time rather than go home. Not much has changed since nineteen year old Robert Chambers murdered eighteen year old Dawn Levin almost two decades ago, and Jack Dorrian, the manager of the bar where it started said, "I could tell you all the times kids sit down and talk to me and tell me what they get and what they don't get at home. I have kids coming and hugging me because they want the feeling of being touched. I have kids who want to sleep over at my house."

We have more money, and spend it more freely, and have less communication than ever despite having more ways to reach out than ever before. Money is not the root of all evil, but we sure think it solves problems and creates contacts. Remember, this is the country where we were told after 9-11 to go out and shop. And we did. When we value making money, spending money, a car, a beer, or whatever over a relationship, we send a message that money and/or objects are more important than people. Children and grandchildren get the message.

Once a rich but miserly *hasid* came to his *rebbe*. The *rebbe* took him by the hand and led him to the window.

"Look out there. What do you see?" asked the *rebbe*.

"People," replied the rich man. Again the *rebbe* took him by the hand, and this time led him to a mirror. "What do you see now?" The rich man answered, "I see myself."

Then the *rebbe* says, "In the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. What's the difference? The mirror's glass is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others and see only yourself."

Relationships require seeing more than ourselves. Raising children to be *menschen*, good people with strong values and a permanent moral direction to their lives requires both time and example. The ability to change is difficult. The answer to lite and to selfishness is neither easy nor painless. The classic Jewish answer this time of year is called, *m,sirat nefesh*, which literally means "handing over one's soul," and actually means "self-sacrifice, risking one's life." To do so requires complete commitment, total dedication, and entails risks—we might get hurt, the relationship might disintegrate—but the rewards are worthwhile—a lasting relationship, a sense of *nakhes*, pleasure.

This process brings up another relationship that probably needs to be fixed, and one that can help fix our other ones: Judaism. Judaism can provide the anchor that heals and builds relationships, yet for many of us it too is lite. If we had a *bar/bat mitzvah*, we are satisfied. We say, "I'm not religious, but I feel Jewish." "I don't go to services, but I'm a good Jew." "I don't know much about the Bible or Jewish history, but my instincts are Jewish." "I don't have the time to study Jewish sources, but I go to lots of meetings." Some of you have heard my retorts to these, but I won't repeat them tonight. Would you ever tell your boss, "I'm satisfied with my skills that I learned by 13?" We seek more knowledge at work and on hobbies, but not Judaism. Judaism is anything but lite; it is substantive.

*Rosh Ha-shanah* reminds us that as Jews we should be dissatisfied with the status quo both intellectually and in our actions. Judaism cannot survive on pious sentimentality and nostalgic reminiscences. It requires *m,sirat nefesh*, commitment, sort of like the chicken and the salmon conversation about an eggs with lox brunch I mentioned a few years ago, where the chicken donates the eggs but the salmon makes a total commitment to the lox. Introducing a Jewish way of looking at the world means just that. It includes prayer, like thanking God for food and not being a thief of nature, *tzedaqah* not as charity but righteousness, like *Shabbat* for giving over our precious time to thinking about the bigger things and what truly matters, including relationships with people as well as God, instead of another day to work, shop or engage in our hobbies. If we take our Judaism seriously, make it a vital force in our lives, we will improve our relationships and our values. The rabbis in the *Talmud* taught, "Any *mitzvah* that Jews perform with *m,sirat nefesh* continues to be a life-giving force for them in every generation." The rabbis even

taught that studying *Torah* is the only way to ensure that we have the ability to follow through on improving our life when our nature wants to take the easy path.

In the *Talmud* (*RH* 8b; *Deut R* 2:14), the angels ask God, "When will *Rosh Ha-shanah* begin?" God answers, "Why ask Me!? Go to earth and ask the human court. Once the human court has sanctified the month, we will convene the heavenly court to judge." The rabbis audaciously proclaim that our actions determine the future. The quality of our lives will depend on the quality of our *m,sirat nefesh*, our sacrifice and commitment. Regarding today's *shofar* service, Rabbi Abahu asked: Why do we sound the ram's horn? The Praised Holy One declared: "Sound the ram's horn before Me, that I may recall the Binding of Isaac in your favor, and consider you as having bound yourselves, in faith, on the sacrificial altar" (*RH* 16a). We must give of ourselves, risk in order to achieve. The *shofar* blast calls us. The primal sound exclaims, "Wake up!" Examine your deeds, and yourself, turn in repentance, remember your Creator. Don't get caught in the fads and follies of the time, frittering away your years in vanity and emptiness which cannot help. Improve your ways.

May this year bring us and our loved ones greater fulfillment and greater happiness through heightened self-sacrifice. *L,shanah tovah tikkatevu*. May you be inscribed for a good and healthy year.