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Congregation Beth Israel
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Elul Drash: Preparing for the Yamim Nora'im

A former chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook of Jerusalem lay in the hospital recovering from a heart attack. It was the month of Elul and, in accord with the tradition of preparing for the upcoming High Holy Days, he asked that the shofar be blown each morning so that he could fulfill the commandment to hear the blowing of the ram's horn. The rabbi's doctor feared that the violent blasts of the shofar might have an adverse effect on his critically-ill patient. He argued in vain against Rav Kook's request.

Then, one of Rav Kook's disciples said to the doctor, "You are trying in the wrong way. Only suggest to Rav Kook that the other patients might be disturbed by the blasts."

As soon as the doctor proffered this suggestion, Rav Kook immediately replied, "If that is the case, do not permit the shofar to be blown!"ⁱ

We are also in the month of Elul. This time, as the story tells us, is about preparing for the High Holy Days. But what do we need to actually do to prepare? And how do we know when we're done preparing? Getting ready for Pesach is a whole lot different. We clean the house, get rid of the *hametz* and cook some food. This can be quite tiring, but straightforward. We know when we've completed our tasks.

According to *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*ⁱⁱ, author Mark Washofsky writes that it is a mitzvah to prepare for the Days of Awe. To do this, one can recite special penitential prayers each day. It is also customary to visit the graves of relatives and increase the giving of *tzedakah*.

And according to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*ⁱⁱⁱ, one should fulfill the commandments, or *mitzvot*, in the most perfect way possible. One should also make amends to the best of one's abilities and in some communities, Steinsaltz notes that pious Jews will hold a *Ta'anit Dibbur*, or a "fast of speech."

I just referenced two respectable guidebooks to Jewish practice—one Reform and the other Orthodox. I have found many other things that we can do to prepare during Elul from a few more books on my shelves. While the High Holy Days are a big deal, perhaps the biggest deal in our calendar, and they do demand some work on our part, I also am aware that fulfilling many of these prescriptions might not happen when our lives are as busy as they are. It isn't easy training for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

So, perhaps we can simply heed the advice of Rav Kook. The rabbi teaches us a wonderful lesson in humility. He teaches us that what matters most is being attuned to the feelings of those around us. He teaches us that listening to the needs of others should, at times, trump our own wishes. If we can take a step back from our own concerns for a short time, then

patching up old wounds with our friends and family members might be a bit easier. By stripping a bit of our egos away, we invite the possibility of *teshuva* to transform us into better people.

I'd like to close with a poem written by Rabbi Harold Schulweis that is apropos of this time of reflection and action.

It Is Never Too Late, by Rabbi Harold Schulweis

The last word has not been spoken,
The last sentence has not been written,
The final verdict is not in.
It is never too late
To change my mind,
My direction,
To say no to the past
And yes to the future,
To offer remorse,
To ask forgiveness.
It is never too late
To start over again,
To feel again
To love again
To hope again...

May this month bring meaning, understanding, light and love into your lives.

Shabbat shalom

ⁱ Rossel, Seymour. "Sound the Shofar." *The Essential Jewish Stories*. Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2011. 255

ⁱⁱ Washofsky, Mark. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Jewish Practice*. New York: URJ Press, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ Steinsaltz, Adin. *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*. New York: Schocken Books, 2000