

Rosh Hashana 5768-Don't Think So Much!

A strange slogan, I suppose, but I think that it might be both appropriate and helpful for some. The High Holidays are approaching and so many of us are looking forward to celebrating with family and friends. I'm certain that many are (if I may say so) looking forward to being in synagogue for a variety of reasons. While some people are comfortable praying, for others, praying is not on the list of things to look forward to for the holidays. There are a variety of reasons while this may be so and I'd like to suggest just one possible approach which may help you if you are facing this difficulty.

Try not to think so much! I know that it is hard but just try. Here's what I mean. Praying is a unique activity; it isn't learning, it isn't reading, it isn't philosophizing---it is praying, and confusing it with one of these other activities leads to bad davening. Of course, you could read the Mahzor (High Holiday prayer book) and you can certainly learn something from it. But if we focus on what the experience of davening could be, we may find that praying can engage us on many levels.

In his book, *The Art of Public Prayer*, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman offers an important insight about prayer. He reminds us that to pray is to take part in a sacred drama. We are the dramatists. When we open the prayer book we are being invited to participate in this drama. To do so, we need to deliver our 'lines' in good form. Too many people however, understand this to mean that they need to fully understand and intellectually agree with the words of the prayer book before reciting them. So, people spend services reading the Mahzor and deciding whether they can agree or not with the words.

Seemingly forgotten is the nature of the words. The prayer book is not a book of theology, and it is not a science text book. It is a book of poetry and metaphor. Imagine how confused you would be if you read poetry as though it were science. As Rabbi Brad Artson has said, when we read the line, "My love is like a red, red rose," we don't assume that it is referring to a person who is sort of stinky, red from the neck up, and green and prickly from the neck down! When we read the prayer book as poetry, we open ourselves up to the possibility of interacting with the words and the very real expectation that the words carry multiple meanings.

Please don't misunderstand. There is much to learn about the prayer book---the history, original meanings, context within the service. And we should spend time learning about this. But when we walk into the synagogue, our primary goal is experiencing prayer. This experience must go beyond the intellectual if it is to touch us, change us and allow us to feel our prayers as true expressions of who we are and who we hope to be.

On behalf of Robin and myself, L'shana Tova U'Metuka. May you have a sweet and happy new year.