

## A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

With

Rabbi Paul Swerdlow

### Elul – A time to complete unfinished business

Our journey begins a month before Rosh Hashanah. We are about to close the page on another year. Before we do, we have some unfinished business. Begin the month by listing everything that we would like to accomplish before the shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashanah. Once we have completed the list, decide what we would like to accomplish that week. At the beginning of each week during Elul, review the list and select what to do in the coming week. Be sure to give particular attention to those items about which we have procrastinated.

### Selichot – A time to forgive yourself

The ten days of repentance is our opportunity to forgive others and ask others to forgive us. On Yom Kippur, we seek God's forgiveness. Why do we need another service on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah for forgiveness? It is because forgiveness must begin with forgiving oneself. The first step is to acknowledge that we have done something wrong. If we stop there, we only have created guilt that punishes. So a second step is required. Ask ourselves, what lesson have we learned. This is guilt that teaches. When we face the same situation again, we shall do the right thing. When we have acknowledged our wrong doing and have learned from it, we can then ask for forgiveness.

### Rosh Hashanah – A time to let go

It is the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah and we find ourselves at the water; casting our bread upon the water. Traditionally this represents the casting out of our sins. But it is much more. It is letting go of that which holds us back. This could be many things. It could be a bad habit that affects our health. It could be a grudge that eats away at us. It could be a guilt that we have allowed to fester rather than to learn from it. It could be a fear that prevents us from doing what we want to do. What is holding us back from being the best we can be? As we cast the bread upon the water, we resolve to let go so that we may move forward in this new year.

### Ten Days of Repentance – A time to forgive and be forgiven

We are taught that before we can approach God to ask forgiveness, we must approach those we have wronged and seek their forgiveness. When others approach us for forgiveness, we need to forgive. We use the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to forgive and be

forgiven. This seems simple enough but questions arise. What if I ask for forgiveness but the person whom I have asked refuses to give me that forgiveness? In the Book of Samuel, it says that “man sees only the outward appearance but God sees into the heart.” If our request for forgiveness is sincere and if we have learned from our mistakes, we have fulfilled our obligation even if the wronged person refuses to grant forgiveness. Do I have to be asked for forgiveness before granting it? Absolutely not! Do not let these feelings that we have been wronged fester in us. Acknowledge our feelings and address them. There are a number of ways to do this. We may accept this as an imperfection in someone whom we do like. We may ask ourselves, what is it about me that makes his/her action bother me? We may share our feelings with the one whose action upsets us.

### Yom Kippur – A time to love

It is said that we are little lower than the angels and yet little higher than the beasts of the field. On Yom Kippur, we forego our physical needs and focus on our spiritual needs. There is no greater spiritual need than love. During Yizkor, we remember those whom we loved and as we recall the beautiful memories we once shared, we know that the love we shared survives the grave. When two people love each other when they are together, the love is there when they are apart and so that feeling of love does not cease even at death.

At every service, we speak of our love for God and God’s love for us. Sitting beside us at the service is someone whom we love. Have we said to him/her I love you? You cannot say it enough in word and in deed. Tell them “ I love you.” Say it again and again and again. Never take it for granted.

### Sukkot – A time to give thanks

Sukkot has been compared to Thanksgiving. We enter the Sukkah to greet the Ushpizim, our honored ancestors. As we remember them, we give thanks for the sacrifices they made and the values they left as their inheritance that make us the people we are today. We raise the lulav (the palm, willow and myrtle) and the etrog (similar to a lemon) and shake it to the east and to the north, to the south and the west, up and down. With the lulav and etrog we are reaching out to God to say thank you. As we leave the Sukkah, having reached up to God and back to our ancestors to say thank you, we reach out to those who have made a difference in our lives during the past year. Identify at least five people who have made a significant difference in our lives during the past year and say thank you and tell them why we appreciate what they have done. Do this during the period between the first two days of Sukkot and Simchat Torah

## Simchat Torah – A time to open up

The holiday season is ending. We read the final verses of the book of Deuteronomy and immediately follow it with the reading of the first verses of Genesis. We have ended and are beginning again. So too we have ended the old year and are ready to begin a new year. A new beginning offers the promise of new possibilities. For us, it is a time to open up and welcome this opportunity to meet new challenges and new adventures – to continue to grow from strength to strength.