

September 2005 Article for Kol HaLev Happenings  
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Elul: Just do it!

We have arrived once more at “that time of year.” Summer is quickly coming to an end at least in the psychological and practical sense if not quite in the meteorological one. For many of us, fall routines have once again begun and that can only mean that the High Holidays cannot be far behind. And yet we find that there is still quite a bit of time before they arrive due to that somewhat unpredictable overlay of our tradition’s hybrid solar-lunar calendar onto our Western academic and purely solar one. As the old saying goes, the holidays are always early or late, but they are never on time.

I realize that some may anticipate this year’s late arrival of Rosh Hashannah with anxiety as they meditate on the vision of snow falling into our sukkot (That of course would form a perfect bookend with our Pesach blizzard of last April). However, I prefer to focus on the fact that we now have an entire month to engage in preparation for the Days of Awe that is much less encumbered by vacation time the persistent call of recreation and relaxation. I have argued on previous occasions that investing some time in reflection on the congruence or lack thereof between our values and our behaviors during this month of preparation can make of a world of difference in how we experience the holidays when they finally do arrive. This month of Elul is a gift given to us by our tradition that provides an opportunity to explore, and get some perspective on, the deeper aspects of our lives that all too often get ignored in the day to day frenzy of deadlines, appointments and transitioning from one obligation to the next.

There are as many ways to go through this process as there individuals in the world. Some will find it most appropriate to set aside some time each week for personal reading, writing or meditating on the great themes of this period of our sacred year: forgiveness, renewal, the possibility of growth and development. Others will seek out an Elul hevruta study partner or small group with whom to share this process of pushing our respective growing edges. Still others will want to pursue this experience through the structure of a class through Kol HaLev or the Seigal College. Whichever direction in which one is drawn, the important thing is simply to find time to do it. There is a rich array of resources that are available today that were not available just a few short years ago. There are bookshelves full of volumes on personal growth that are based on a variety of different Jewish paths such as Kabbalah, Mussar (development of virtuous traits) and the rational/philosophical tradition. There are several versions of guides to doing the work of Elul in pamphlet form. There are resources on the internet beyond what we could use in a lifetime. May we all during the coming month find, each in our way, a path into this challenging and rewarding process of soul accounting (Heshbone ha nefesh) as it is traditionally called, that we may arrive at the door of a Jewish year with a true sense of possibility for movement in our lives.

L’shannah tovah tikateivu,

Rabbi Steve