

September 2008 Article for Kol HaLev Happenings
Rabbi Steve Segar
Kol HaLev – Cleveland’s Reconstructionist Community

Once again we have come around in our sacred yearly cycle to the month that precedes the beginning of a new Jewish year. This month of Elul (which begins on September 1st) presents a wonderful opportunity to go through a process of preparation for the upcoming High Holy Days rather than entering “cold” on the eve of Rosh Hashannah. Though the Days of Awe clearly have a powerful magnetic pull that they exert on our sense of needing to be present with the broader community, it is too often the case that the collective dimensions of the experience, especially, but not limited to the length, complexity and language of the prayer book, can leave many of us slightly perplexed about what it is exactly that we should be trying to get out of this experience. One clear remedy for such perplexity is to come into this communal context with a very personal agenda for which the month of Elul is perfectly suited.

There are many Jewish people who misunderstand this time of year as one during which we are supposed to intensively focus on identifying the ways in which we may have hurt others in our lives and resolve to seek their forgiveness. While this kind of activity is certainly one important piece of what the Days of Awe can be about, it is far from being the end of the story. My perspective on this period of time is that it is about looking at the big picture of our lives as we have lived them during the past year and as we would like to live them in the one upcoming. While this can and often does include redressing things we have said or done that we regret, it can also include reflection on each aspect of our lives, from career to physical health to inner growth to our participation or lack thereof in social networks. And, this process does not need to have an exclusive spotlight on what hasn’t gone as we would have liked. The High Holy days can and should also be a time when we acknowledge and celebrate the strengths and successes that have emerged in our lives in addition to the places where we sense a need for more growth and understanding.

Another aspect of this personal reflection might also include an attempt to project ourselves into the coming year and the development of some clarity of intention around directions in which we feel drawn towards moving. For some, this could be a movement involving expansion or deepening, while for others the direction may be more towards greater limit setting or slowing down in some ways. In any case, if we can manage to set aside some time (even if it’s only half an hour per week) during the month of Elul to ask ourselves these questions and begin to sense some answers, we will be in much better shape to use the Days of Awe when they arrive, to further explore, elaborate on and affirm our commitment to moving in the new directions we have envisioned for ourselves.

Rabbi Steve