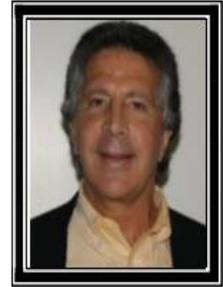


Lach L'Chai

By Rabbi Howard Mandell



Dear Congregants and Friends:

I am flying back to Boston from Birmingham, AL, having just spent a delightful time with my son, Josh, his wife, and my 3 grandchildren. I have also this summer had my body and soul refreshed by a visit with my son, Charlie, and his wife at their home in Marin County, CA, and by participating in a Jewish chanting and prayer retreat in Santa Fe, NM, where I also got to spend some time with my closest friend and his wife from college.

As the month of August and the slower pace of summer draw to a close, however, my thoughts inevitably turn to the fall and to new beginnings, to the Jewish High Holy Days, which occur rather late this year, and to the opening of classes at Merrimack College where I will be teaching. As a professor at the College, I better understand why my mother, who was a 5th grade public school teacher, and her teacher friends, approached the fall with mixed emotions—excitement about returning to a profession that, and being with the children whom, they loved; at the same, they knew that the calm and freedom of summer was drawing to an end, and for the next 9 months, they would be working most days from early morning to night.

By the time this column is published, the month of *av*, which includes both perhaps the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar, *tisha b'av*, the solemn fast day on which our Tradition teaches the First and Second Temples were destroyed and other national calamities occurred, and the joyous holiday of *tu b'av*, Israel's version of Valentine's Day, will have passed, and the Jewish calendar will be entering the month of *elul*, the month leading into the *yamim noraim*, "The 10 Days of Awe".

Our Tradition encourages us to use the month of *elul* in our planning and preparation for the High Holy Days. More specifically, while planning menus and guest lists for the special and festive Holiday meals is clearly an important part of the planning process, what our Tradition is referring to is our spiritual planning and preparation.

To help us get started with our spiritual planning and preparation, I would suggest that we begin asking ourselves the following 3 questions during the month of *elul*:

1. How do I want to approach the Holidays this year: as I have in the past, or perhaps in a more conscious and intentional way?
2. Looking back over the past year, and reflecting on my words and behavior, on what I did well, and what I might have done better, in what way(s) and area(s) would I like to grow and change in the coming year?
3. Once I have determined this, what are the steps that I can take to make this goal or objective a reality?

By preparing ourselves spiritually during the month of *elul*, and not waiting until *rosh hashanah* to begin the process, our High Holy Day experience will inevitably be a more meaningful and transformative one.

One last thought or suggestion to assist in our preparation. Acknowledging our short

comings and the mistakes that we may have made over the past year, which is what we are called upon to do both to God and to those we may have hurt in some way, does not come easily to us humans. We humans are programmed, it seems, by our DNA to become defensive, to blame the other, to find an excuse for our behavior, to make almost any response other than to say “I’m sorry” and to acknowledge our human frailties and imperfections.

Recognizing this, Judaism teaches that our ability to do *teshuva* depends on our willingness to approach the Holidays with *anavah*, with humility. Humility in the Jewish Tradition calls upon us to be neither so haughty or arrogant that we are unable to admit to our human flaws and imperfections, nor so self-effacing that we think that we are so inherently flawed that there is no hope for us. What our rich and beautiful Tradition teaches, to the contrary, is that each of us is basically a good person, but that, being human, we always have room for improvement.

The Jewish *mussar* movement, or tradition, offers a long list of *midot*, or human traits or attributes, that we can work on during the coming year, ranging from humility to gratitude to compassion. At the Jewish chanting retreat I attended this past summer, each of us in attendance was asked to think about one particular *midah*, or trait or attribute, which had special meaning to us, that we might want to work on for the coming year. I have already begun to work on the trait that I selected at the retreat and will be talking about it in my High Holy Day sermons.

Is there a *middah* on which you would like to work during the coming year? If so, I will be glad to meet with you to offer any suggestions I may have to help you get started on your journey.

Shalom Uvracha! Sending Peace and Blessing to Your Loved Ones, to You, and to The Entire CBI Community!

Rabbi Howard Mandell