

From the Rabbi's Desk

September 2019

Chaverim,

In his introduction to *Mesillat Yesharim*, one of the most important works of the mussar movement, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto states the purpose of his book is not to teach people what they do not know, but rather to remind them of what they already know and of what is familiar to them. He goes on to say that his work will have the most benefit if it is read over and over again. By nature, we are forgetful people. Sometimes we are forgetful because circumstances distract us from what we know to be morally and ethically right. It is quite human to forget temporarily about the tragedy and injustice befalling our fellow when we are concerned or even afraid for our own welfare. At other times, we are distracted by convenience. It is quite human to forget temporarily our fellows as we are trying to capture our own wealth, or ensure our security. Luzzatto states that there is little new in his book. The benefit of his book, which can be viewed as a compilation and commentary on Biblical passages and rabbinic thought, is simply as a reminder of our duties and obligations as human beings.

We are entering yet again the month of Elul. This is the time of *cheshbon hanefesh*, accounting of one's soul. The accounting is in preparation for the High Holy Days. It is at this time that our Jewish tradition imagines that we are brought to account before the Source of our being. Thus, the accounting is of existential importance. The accounting should be an involved process of questioning and responding. Have we missed the mark, strayed from the right path? Have we wronged or ignored the needs of our fellow? How will we engage in true *tshuvah* – not just abandoning an evil deed, but seeking forgiveness and resolving with sincerity to never repeat the action? How will we attempt to make reconciliation with those we've wronged? Have we attempted to forgive those who have wronged us and asked for forgiveness? Whether we believe the imagery of our tradition or not, it is the process of *cheshbon hanefesh* and *tshuvah* that is important. The intensive soul searching during Elul, prepares us to enter the new year unbound by the past, ready to confront the present and envision the future.

I am normally not one for rereading books or watching movies more than once. Yet this is exactly what our tradition demands. Each week at a minimum we should reread a portion of Torah and the Prophets. Additionally, we can engage in a Jewish text study group, rereading Mishna, Talmud, or The Zohar. These exercises are not about scholarly pursuits, engaging in tradition, or even social connection to friends with whom we study and pray. Rather the purpose is to remind us of what we know or should know – the way to be on the right path, a sacred path. Our sacred texts are not historical relics. We have had moral and ethical principles laid out for us. They most certainly inform what our response should be to the terrible goings on in the world around us.

Yet, it is easy to forget. To forget is only natural. In Pirkei Avot, Mishna 1:15, we are advised that Shammai was known to say, "make your study of Torah a fixed practice, say little and do much, and receive all humanity with a pleasant countenance." As we enter Elul, consider the texts that you need to reread, or perhaps read for the first time and then reread.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Marc