
“Review And Preparation”

by Rabbi Norman Lamm

It is told of a follower of the great Hassidic master, Rabbi Mordecai of Danburra, that during the summer he came to pay the Rabbi an extended visit, so that he might learn the ways of Torah and righteousness from him. Some time before Rosh Hashanah, he came to the Rabbi to take his leave and bid him farewell.

“And why are you hurrying to return home at this time?” asked the Rabbi of the Hassid.

“You see, Rabbi,” he answered, “I am a ‘shliach tzibbur’, and conduct the services on the High Holidays in my home town. I therefore must leave early so that I can review the ‘machzor’ and prepare my prayers before the holy day.”

“Go, my son,” the wise Rabbi answered, “but remember that the Machzor and the prayers are the same as last year and the year before that. It is more important for you to review *your own life* and prepare *yourself*!”

Those words apply with equal force and relevance to all of us. Again we shall flock to “shul” to congregate in awe before the Divine Throne of Justice, to hear the challenges of Shofar, to recite the ancient prayers whose words are hoary with reverent age and yet rise up at us with ever-sustaining vigor. But it is the same congregation, the same G-d, the same Justice, the same Shofar and the same prayers. They have not changed nor will they change. It is we who must change. It is ourselves whom we must “review and prepare”.

This review of the past year and preparation for the next year are predicated on the fundamental Jewish confidence that man can change; nay, *must* change.

If we will not review and prepare ourselves, if we will not change, then assuredly the others mentioned will not. The congregation will be beset with the same woes. G-d will not meet us any differently. Justice will be as unbending as ever. The Shofar will remain a hoarse and ineffective cry in the darkness. And the prayers will have become meaningless repetitions which fail to light a spark in our hearts and penetrate the depths of our souls with the touch of Divine ecstasy.

Let each of us therefore review his life, especially this last year. How far have we strayed from Torah — and how legitimate have been our excuses? Have we been indifferent to the fate of our fellow-men, insensitive to their hurts and unresponsive to their silent pleading? An honest review of this kind is hard, painful. But is a catharsis, it cleanses our spiritual systems.

Then follows preparation. This year must be *different* from the last with regard to our study of Torah and the observance of Mitzvos. Away with the lame excuses and self-deluding rationalizations. And it must be a year when we shall not cause pain to our fellow-men, whether physical or financial or—worst of all—the agony that is caused by the loose word, the untamed tongue and the cynical smile. It must be a year when we shall exert ourselves to help others, when we shall heed the call of synagogue and school, when we shall extend the hand of friendship to the lonely stranger who enters through our gates.

Let us do that—review our lives and prepare ourselves—and these holidays will be different indeed. Our congregation will flourish as it fulfills its real functions. God will be to us a Father rather than Master. Justice will welcome Mercy at its side. The Shofar will sound not only a challenge, but a clear call of rejoicing, which will usher in a year of happiness for each and redemption for all.

And the prayers—the change in us will breathe a breath of new life into the sacred words. The letters will vibrate. The chant will charm us. The warmth of love and the flavor of holiness will inspire us. On the wings of our prayers our spirits will soar. Our new hearts will find new worlds of hallowed meaning in every verse. We will indeed merge, and be as one with these outpourings of our hearts. As David put it: “Ani Sefillah”—*I am a prayer*.

May our review inspire a judicial review of our fate by the Divine King. May our preparation result in the preparation for us, by God Almighty, of a year of life, blessing, health and happiness.