

## **RABBI'S MESSAGE**

### **If Not Now, When?**

One of my favorite Hasidic stories is about a rich man who hires storytellers, paying the highest for stories he has never heard before. He pays well, but no matter how many different stories he hears, no story satisfies him. The best storytellers try to move him to laughter or tears. They get no reaction...only payment.

One day, a storyteller arrives who had studied with the Baal Shem Tov, known as a master rabbi, teacher and leader. This storyteller also fails in his attempts. Just as he thinks he has run out of stories, he remembers one more. At the conclusion of his last story, the rich man breaks down in tears and hugs the storyteller. He then explains why this was the only story he wanted to hear.

“Years ago, I met the Baal Shem Tov myself,” he began. “I led a selfish life, hurting many people. Observing the rabbi, I realized I needed to change. He questioned my sincerity, and I couldn’t blame him. I asked, ‘How will I know when I’m truly ready to be the righteous person I want to be?’ He said that one day I would hear my own story told to me. Well, you’ve just told my story!”

Good listening is the most valuable gift we can offer. Many of us are able to view other people’s lives critically. We see other’s mistakes, and believe we have the answers. We cast judgment on celebrities, politicians, athletes and even our own friends and family, assuming we know what’s best for them...if they would only listen to us!

On Yom Kippur, we repent for our own shortcomings and for the community. We say, “...for the sins WE have committed...,” acknowledging communal responsibility. Perhaps, we pray, our support can help loved ones stay on the right path. By offering prayers beginning with “we,” our New Year wishes become inclusive of others.

Of course, we also need to remember “I” prayers. Focusing only on “we,” might prevent us from acknowledging our own issues. The rich man in the tale knew his story; but it wasn’t real until he heard it from someone else. Sometimes it’s easier to see someone else’s truth than our own.

The beginning of a New Year is a good time to remember Hillel’s famous saying: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” The sequence of this three-part quote is essential. We must be strong enough within ourselves to help others. On airplanes, we are instructed to put on our own oxygen mask before helping a child. We won’t be much help if we can’t breathe. Once we take care of ourselves, we’re in much better shape to help someone else.

May this be the year when we can each hear the stories we need to hear. Perhaps then, we’ll learn how to truly be for ourselves, and not only for ourselves.

Shana Tova, for rich and fulfilling New Year for all!

L’shalom,

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