

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Labor of Love to Begin the Year

When comparing the Hebrew calendar with the standard, Gregorian calendar, sometimes we find an odd quirk that provides a unique lesson. This year, Erev Rosh Hashana, the night we begin our entire High Holiday season and the New Year, is on Labor Day. Labor Day in America is a designated day off, a legal holiday, to honor the many ways workers contribute to our well-being. Rosh Hashana is designated as *Yontiff*, a day when working is against Jewish law. Many Jewish Americans struggle with the decision to take off from their regular jobs on *Yontiff* because it is not universally understood by non-Jewish employers.

In Hebrew, the word for work is *avodah*. At the beginning of the Passover seder, there is a passage that begins, *Avadim Hayinu*, or “We were slaves (workers).”

Because Hebrew often has multiple meanings for words, the word *avodah* takes on a different meaning in a special teaching from Pirke Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors) that has become a popular song. At Temple Beth Torah, we often sing this song while the Torah parades through the congregation:

Al Shlosa D'varim ha-Olam Omed

On three things the world stands

Al ha-Torah, v'al ha-Avodah, v'al G'milut Hasadim

On Torah, on prayer and on loving kindness. (Pirke Avot 1:2)

Notice that the word *avodah* in this teaching is translated as prayer. Why is the word for prayer the same as the one for work? Are we working when we pray? This translation has always been confusing to me, but bringing Labor Day and Rosh Hashana together has helped me add some understanding.

On Rosh Hashana, we pray for a year that is healthy, prosperous and fulfilling. Our contemplations leading up to Yom Kippur and the rest of the year are significant. And while we repeat the same words that we recited last year and the year before, our intention can be much different. The sacred work of prayer can inspire us to pursue knowledge (Torah) and to perform deeds of loving kindness. Our *avodah* consists of internal work that connects us to G-d, our fellow human beings and the world. Laborers must prepare for their work by training, learning, obtaining supplies and working well with team members that bring a variety of skills to the task. On Rosh Hashana, our prayers are preparation for an entire year of *mitzvot*. On Rosh Hashana, we prepare ourselves by tasting the sweetness of apples and honey, wishing each other Shana Tova, and deeply engaging with our own spiritual selves. Love is at the center, as our prayers help us engage in spiritual connections with the Divine and with humanity. *Yontiff*, instead of being a day off from work, is when we do our most important work: preparing to fulfill the sacred task of making the world a better place. Our preparation, devotion and teamwork build community at the beginning of the year and for the rest of our days.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon