

The High Holidays are Knocking – Elul 5770
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*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore--
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door--
Only this, and nothing more."*

~ "The Raven," Edgar Allen Poe

Each year at around this time, rabbis all across the country feel the rapping. We are awakened from our slumber, not to Edgar Allen Poe's raven, but to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Like the raven the Yamim Noraim – the High Holidays has alighted upon our chamber doors – and they whisper, "write your sermon, nothing more".

This is Shabbat *Mevarchim*, Elul, the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Elul, when we welcome the month that precedes the High Holidays. We are just a month from Rosh Hashanah, this is all that remains of the time to craft a message that will inspire and engage, and hopefully awaken the community for the New Year. But we rabbis have it wrong if the only anticipation we have for the coming year is fixation with writing sermons. And we also have it wrong if we think that we are alone in the awesome task of preparing for the New Year. We are not. The bell tolls for you too. All Jews should feel the butterflies in the stomach for the New Year. Now is the time for soul searching, reflecting on the meaning of our lives, preparing to turn over a new leaf. The Days of Awe are knocking for us all.

There is a story told of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. As soon as Rosh Hashannah is over, the Rabbi would listen for the sound of knocking at doors, the sound of Jews rousing themselves to already recite the penitential prayers for the next Elul; already preparing for the next High Holidays. For, he said, in no time the whole year passes in the twinkling of an eye.

The fact is that the year passes just that fast. How far removed we are from the promises we made last year. The new leaf that we turned over is worn. Have we lived up to being the people we said we were going to be? Have we lived with the intention and appreciation for our lives and loved ones like we said we would as the gates closed on Neilah last year? Once again we should start to feel the urgency to recalibrate, to retune ourselves so that the notes of our lives are on pitch, sweet to the ear. But we know, and the tale of Rabbi Nachman reminds us, that the process of living in goodness, of being our best selves is on going. Too often we lose sight of this as we venture out from the New Year.

Our Torah portion this Shabbat, *Re'eh*, suggests that especially at this season, but also each day of the year our tradition empowers us to choose the kind of individuals we wish to be. "*Re'eh!-Look!*" the Torah implores the Israelites, "I place before you this day blessing and curse – *anochi notein lifneichem hayom bracha v'klalah.*" Our actions are in our hands, how behave, the values by which we choose

to live reside within our control. This is daunting. This is a burden. But ultimately, this is the blessing of our tradition and the theme of the season.

Encouraging us in the personal work ahead, the Vilna Gaon, the great 18th century rabbi explained the verse like this: The first word, *re'eh* speaks to the individual, "you can choose blessing, no matter what others are doing or how others are behaving. And lest you think that you are not strong enough to make the right choices, to go down the right path, then *Anochi*, I, God will be there to support you. But, the Vilna Gaon, teaches, God did not just give this choice of blessing and curse to the Israelites, nor does God just give us this choice at one moment in our lives. If we choose blessing then we are not eternally good, and when we make mistakes we are eternally wicked. Not so, for the verse says, *notein*, God gives, continually the option to become what we will. Choosing blessing, the opportunity for personal redemption, healing, *teshuvah*, and repair are present for us at each moment when we are ready to return. Then, God changes the grammar of the verse from singular to plural "*lifneichem*." All of you, the entire community has the opportunity to choose between blessing and curse. It is up to each of us as individuals to make the right choice, but as we prepare for the High Holidays we are supported by one another, encouraged by a community of individuals who espouse Jewish values. And finally, the verse ends, *Hayom* – this day. Each day is a new day, a blank slate according to the Vilna Gaon. Today and tomorrow we have the opportunity to live with intention, to strive for goodness.

Even so, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur come knocking once again. Late summer, the dog days of August are here. If we have become lax in our daily efforts to reflect and do *teshuvah*, return to the right path, these upcoming holy days shake us out of our slumber. Our lives are not endless. Now is the time to choose blessing and life. As Elul begins, it is a tradition to gain inspiration from the words of the 27th Psalm, "One thing I ask of Adonai, only that do I seek: to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Source of life..." In keeping with this custom and in preparation for the Days of Awe, we sing Psalm 27 now and at each Shabbat through the month of Elul. The melody is beautiful and full of yearning. Add your voice as you answer the call of the coming High Holidays.