

REFORM JUDAISM

In preparation of the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pause to consider the meaning of their relevance to the issue facing Maine in November: Freedom to Marry.

We are at the tail end of the last month of the Jewish year, Elul, which is traditionally a time of introspection and stocktaking—a time to review one’s deeds and spiritual progress over the past year, and prepare for the upcoming “Days of Awe” of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

As the month of divine mercy and forgiveness, Elul is a most opportune time for *teshuvah* (“return” to God), prayer, charity, and increased *ahavat Yisrael* (love for a fellow Jew), in the quest for self-improvement and coming closer to God. Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi likens the month of Elul to a time when “the king is in the field” and, in contrast to when he is in the royal palace, “everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him, and he receives them all with a cheerful countenance, showing a smiling face to them all.”

The only way to repair, or achieve self-improvement, is to strive to be authentic, the only way to do the work of Elul is to think of all the ways we are committed – to each other, and to the world. “I am beloved, and my beloved is mine”, humans with God, humans with each other, a connection to God, and with each other is crucial to our preparation for the High Holidays.

The first story of Rosh Hashanah is also believed to be the birth of the world, the power of creation. It emphasizes the special relationship between God and humanity: our dependence upon God as our creator and sustainer, and God’s dependence upon us as the ones who make God’s presence known and felt in the world.

The first thing we learn on earth is that we are not meant to be alone in the world. As we move in to Rosh Hashanah, we have the right to not be alone in this creation.

This is a great time to clear away things that are barriers to healing ourselves. We should be able to get to our collective, essential selves – the essence, the true self of honesty, truth, and clarity.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us of the magnitude of the world and how small we are in comparison to it. Our liturgy helps us remember that we have little control over how or when we will die or how or when we were born. So much of who we are is beyond our control. Each of us is as unique as our fingerprints. Rosh Hashanah is inherently connected to the concept of marriage. On Rosh Hashanah we formally begin the process of *teshuvah*, return to God. Our tradition teaches that when we received Torah at Sinai, the people of Israel wedded God with Mount Sinai as our chuppah, our wedding canopy, and Torah our *ketubah*, our marriage contract. On Rosh Hashanah, we renew our wedding vows, we return to our commitment, we reinvest in our relationship with God.

Scripture important to this time: Isaiah 58, 1-14.

More about the Jewish perspective of human dignity and the command to pursue justice

(taken from "Speaking from Faith for Marriage Equality: Resources for people of faith" Outfront Minnesota.)

As Jews, we know that the definition of marriage has continually changed. The Bible defines marriage as a union between one man and one or more women. When we pray, we recall the three patriarchs and the four matriarchs, after all. Classical rabbinic texts do not address same sex marriage. The Talmud teaches us that the value of human dignity is so great that it supersedes any negative commandment in the Torah. Deuteronomy teaches us *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* (Justice, justice shall you pursue). In giving the world the concept of justice, Torah gave the world equality: fair treatment of the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. Time and time again, Torah commands us not to oppress the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt and we know the heart of the stranger. We are Israel and we know what it is to be labeled as different.

Empathy is a central virtue in Judaism. It demands that we see things from the point of view of the other.

Religious Jews who support same-sex marriage approach it with a sense that it is part of our obligation to pursue justice. In Genesis, we are given a vision of humanity that tells us every human being is created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). Rabbi Max Shapiro taught that we have always been a people driven by a sense of justice. We Jews have been the victims of discrimination. We have had jobs, schools and neighborhoods withheld from us because of who we are. "We understand that the law is not enough. The law tells us not to injure. The law forbids us from denying others their rights. But religion goes beyond the law. It demands that we help! Judaism demands that we help the less fortunate, that we protect [their] liberties, that we enhance [their rights]."

The Talmud teaches us that God created all of humanity from one person to illustrate God's genius. The Psalmist teaches us, "How many are the things you have made, O God! You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of your creations!" (Psalm 104:24). Our diversity speaks to God's power. Each one of us has worth and value and dignity.

For Jews, freedom to marry is a religious issue. As Jews, we know what it is like to have our rights limited. Our experience demands that we care for those who are strangers even in the places they live, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. As Jews, our tradition demands that we recognize the image of God in each and every individual.