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Jewish Cultural School & Society

Yom Kippur Reflections, 2005

Peter Cole

The paired holidays Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are two of the holiest in the Jewish calendar. As a devout atheist and very secular Jew, I have no affinity for anything holy. Nevertheless, these two holidays retain substantial personal meaning and significance for me, as they embody many of the most important precepts of Secular Humanistic Judaism.

On Rosh Hashanah, for example, the torah portion traditionally read in temple tells of god testing Abraham's faith, asking him to kill his son Isaac. Since I first heard this one, I've only found this story comprehensible if read as a piece of satire, ridiculing those who would blindly obey a supreme authority. When the biblical scholar Woody Allen re-interpreted the story, god stops Abraham at the last second, incredulous, saying "I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it? ... No sense of humor, I can't believe it. ... It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well modulated voice."

Secular Humanistic Jews realize that the ethical precepts guiding our actions do not derive from any supernatural authority. We realizing the reverse, that no being can claim

absolute authority over another and that governing bodies, to look at a mundane example, derive their authority only by the consent of the people.

We try to remember this precept, because people have an inherent tendency to obey authority, as shown in the last century by the psychological experiments of Stanley Milgram that we all learned about in Psych 101. In the proper conditions, normal volunteers could all be induced to inflict painful "shocks" on actors when instructed to do so. As Humanists, we recoil from this tendency, refusing to accept the validity of the excuse that one was "just following orders" and striving to claim responsibility for our own actions.

Skipping ahead to more current events, we still need to remember the humanistic lessons of the Rosh Hashanah Abraham story. If a hypothetical authority figure were to ask us and our fellow citizens to sacrifice our children, we need not blindly obey. It is our duty to demand a coherent reason for this course of action. Should none be forthcoming, we should question our faith in this figure, and consider withdrawing our consent to be ruled by him or her.

Now here we are on Erev Yom Kippur, nearing the end of the 10 "Days of Awe".



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By tradition Jews spend this period in reflection and introspection, enumerating all the wrongs we've committed in the past year.

With no absolute authority to ask for forgiveness, we instead contemplate the humanistic principles that we try to teach our children: we must be mature enough to realize that we alone bear responsibility for the consequences of our actions and our inactions. To the best of our abilities, we are the authors and publishers of our Book of Life.

We make New Year's resolutions, while trying to remember that actions speak louder than promises. We must *act* if we are to strive toward *tikkun olam* (working actively and positively to try to bring about the healing and transformation of the world -- a core principle of Secular Humanistic Judaism).

It is significant that a passage from Isaiah 58 was chosen to be the haftarah portion read on Yom Kippur in traditional services. It expresses the futility of ritual fasting, affliction, and praying relative to effective personal and group social action:

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast?

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee.

So, as we begin the new year, let us not think about forgiving ourselves for past sins, but reflect on missed opportunities for action in the past year. As Sherwin Wine says, if we can be thankful that our lives are not without hope, that our shelves are not without food, that our hearts are not without friends, then we must also remember that there are those to whom we can give hope, those with whom we can share food, and those whose hearts we can befriend.

So I'll end with one last quote, a few lines from a song by the group "Rage Against The Machine" who are, in turn, very loosely paraphrasing Hillel, when they say:

*It has to start somewhere
It has to start sometime
What better place than here?
What better time than now?*

Peter Cole, a member of the JCSS since 2000, was JCSS President from 2003 to 2005.