

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5768

There once was a woodcutter who was hired by a furniture company. The woodcutter worked very hard and was very skillful. The first day of his job, he had cut down 143 trees (as some of you may know, I don't understand very much about cutting trees, but I understand our woodcutter did a pretty good job). The owners of the company were very impressed with the woodcutter because he was really first-class. During his second day on the job he cut down 125 trees, 18 less than the first day. The third day, the production went down to 104. The owners of the company, who were still happy with the results, didn't say anything to the woodcutter. However, when after a few days he didn't cut down more than a couple of dozen trees a day, they called and asked him why, after such a good beginning, his efficiency had so sharply decreased.

"I don't know," said the woodcutter, "I still work very hard, and I work even more hours a day than when I started."

"Did you sharpen your axe since you started your job?" they asked him.

"Oh, no!" answered the woodcutter, "I forgot!"

The moral is clear. Woodcutters need to sharpen their axes. The right skills, hard work and good intentions some times are not enough to do a good job. If you are a woodcutter, for example, you must find the time to sharpen your axe.

We are not woodcutters, but the lesson can also be applied to ourselves. Regardless of our role within our family, our business, our congregation, we must find the time to recharge our batteries, to sharpen ourselves.

The expression "to recharge our batteries" expresses a need of "a time out" in order to better fulfill our role. For some people a time out means

improving their production, while for others it implies gaining insight or achieving a different perspective at a difficult time in their lives.

However, the reason I brought this story to you, is that it also carries a spiritual lesson.

Our soul is to our life what the axe is to the woodcutter's life. We have a need to sharpen our soul, to nourish it, even if we are not aware of that. The woodcutter in our story didn't realize his axe needed to be sharpened. He might not have even noticed that he was doing a poor job. What is even worse, he might have even forgotten he had an axe in his hands that needed to be taken care of. And the same happens with our soul. We don't usually feel we need to nourish our soul. We don't realize our lives lack meaning. We might even think we don't have a soul at all.

However, "the soul manifests the very reason for our existence; it is the one part of our being that directly reflects our connection to God, our creator. Even though it is not tangible and is hidden within the body, the soul is the very fabric of who we are... The soul is transcendent by nature, for the flame of God is the soul of man... Without the soul there is no life. Yes, there is the bodily struggle to survive, but life as we understand it is all about the pursuit of meaning, the search for our soul, the quest for God" (Jacobson, Simon. [1995] *Towards a meaningful life: The wisdom of the sages*. New York: William Morrow and Company.).

The woodcutter in our story was cutting trees the entire day and he didn't know he was doing a poor job. Most woodcutters know when it is time to sharpen their axes. However, not everybody knows when it is time to nourish his or her soul.

For some people, only deep crisis, only the fact that they cannot function properly as parents, partners, and workers, makes them inquire about their lives, makes them ask themselves: What is it that I am doing wrong?

The High Holy days are a good opportunity to meditate on these issues, an opportunity to think, to stop in the middle of the way, to sharpen us. These days are a gift to us, to explore ourselves.

We can do that using the words of the prayers, the wisdom of our Torah, the insights from the rabbi. Gifted people have the ability to evaluate themselves each day and others do that once a week. Most of us do that once a year, during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On these days, we dedicate time to introspection and evaluation.

At least, once a year I should ask myself: Is this the life I want to live? Is this the model of father, husband, and son that I want to transmit to my children? Am I going on the right way? Or maybe it is time to change direction.

However, if I don't stop to ask these questions, the questions will not be answered.

Hard work is noble, but when hard work becomes an end in itself, instead of a means, we lose perspective. When Pharaoh, disturbed by Moses' message of freedom, wanted to stop any sign of revolution in order to keep slavery in Egypt, he told his taskmasters, *"Let the work be heavier upon the men and let them engage in it; and let them not pay attention to empty words"* (Exodus 5:9).

And what exactly did Moses ask of Pharaoh? *"Let us now go for a three-day journey in the wilderness and we shall bring offerings to Hashem our God"* (Exodus 5:3).

Pharaoh wanted the People of Israel to work hard and to occupy their minds, not to stop, so they would not think about serving God.

And that is the reason Moses asked Pharaoh, "Let us now go for a three-day journey in the wilderness," a three-day-journey, like the two days of Rosh Hashanah and the one-day of Yom Kippur. Three days that had the prospect of changing the lives of the people of Israel, and have the potential to change our lives too.

Once a Hassid asked his master: What do you do before you pray? The Master answered: I pray that I will know how to pray. The High Holy days are days of prayer. Let's pray to God for insight and peace of mind, let's pray

for time to sharpen ourselves, so we will exit these ten coming Holy Days wiser, more sensible and ready to live more meaningful lives.

And may God bless every one of you and your families with health, and joy, with peace of spirit and sustenance, with a good and sweet year!