

September 1, 2009
12 Elul 5769

Dear Friends,

It used to be that when the newspaper came in the morning I would eagerly devour it. Well yes, if it is the local paper, it didn't take too much time. But still reading one or two newspapers, in print, or electronically, gave me pleasure. Even listening to the news is now something I do reluctantly. So much bad news – crime in Iowa City is rising, more Jews are being arrested (it's a shande), health care debate has become a circus – it's depressing. Some people in our congregation are looking for work; having held jobs all of their adult life and now being in an unaccustomed uncomfortable situation. Many are underemployed and just scraping by. Indeed these are troubling economic times.

I really need the New Year to get me motivated – to reach out and help those I can and cast all of it in some greater picture of what is required of me and of the Jewish community. I need these Holy Days to help me put it all in some perspective. If I just look at the details I can easily be dragged down. The High Holidays are an antidote and a stimulus. For all rabbis this is a hectic time. I admit that getting the details pinned down for the holidays is not something I look forward to each year, but the end result is almost always satisfying in that I can see and get a glimpse of a bigger world, a bigger purpose that is beyond the preparation.

Rabbi Jack Reimer tells the following story to rabbis but it certainly applies to everyone:

A student once came to the head of his yeshiva and asked for permission to leave the yeshiva and go home early. "I am a chazzan," he explained, "and I need to go back home and look over the machzor."

"The machzor has not chanted since last year," said his teacher. "But you have. Better go home and look over yourself."

There are two tasks that each of us must do during the month of Elul. One is to look over the machzor and prepare carefully the words that we will use. This task we can do with others. But there is another, a more difficult and important task, that we must do during this month of Elul. We must look inside ourselves to see how we have changed since this time last year. And this task each of us must do alone.

Rabbi Jeff Portman