

Between the Olympics and the Democratic National Convention, and looking forward to watching the Republican National Convention, and worrying about Gustav.... I'm exhausted!

And now that the new month of Elul has begun, I am looking towards Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

There seems to be a common denominator among all these events. The Olympics are about athletes not just competing with each other, but also challenging themselves to go beyond what they are normally capable of and do their personal best. And doing their best requires discipline and training. And practice of their sport.

Well, that's certainly what Elul and the Days of Awe are about – not competing with each other, but each of us challenging ourselves to find our better selves, - In the words of the famous Hasidic story – to be the best Zusya we can be. And we can't be the best Zusya without discipline – not swaying away from the path that we have laid out, and without practice, whether it's practice of doing, or practice of avoiding.

And the conventions? Well, the conventions are about community, and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are certainly about community. The conventions are about identifying what really matters to us, and what our values, deep down, really are. Ditto, the Days of Awe! The conventions commit us to choosing a path, and ideally, so is the process of teshuva – the contemplation of self, the realization of past mistakes, and the resolve to do differently, better, this time.

And Gustav? Well, I threw that in because it's a big story at the moment when I am writing this column, around Labor Day, but Gustav too – *Mee Yichyeh oo-mee Yamoot*, perhaps, or the realization of the fragile nature of our lives, and how much we need to make each day count.

I read a wonderful book last year, by my friend Rabbi Alan Lew, called *This Is Real And You Are Totally Unprepared*. Lew sees the weeks between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana and then Yom Kippur as metaphor and training for the business of life and evaluation of self and revival. It frames these weeks as an opportunity to really go within, and to see both within ourselves, and to see ourselves as part of a much larger chain of humanity. It's great Elul reading, and I highly recommend it.

During this month of Elul, we sound the shofar every day at afternoon 5:45 minyan. If you are not yet a minyan regular, please come one day, and hear the sound of the shofar before Rosh Hashana. Hearing that primal shofar sound is remarkably focusing, as well as comforting and invoking warm memories of childhood. And I believe that the daily sounding of the shofar, or perhaps even hearing it once, moves us to think about the year soon to end, and the year to come. And contemplating, and resolving, can only have positive effects on our lives.

As I do every year, I'm extending an offer for you to come to my study for a yearly "spiritual," just like you go for a yearly "physical." I welcome the opportunity to chat, to hear what's on your mind, what are the challenges that you are facing this year, or at this time in your life, and what are your dreams and hopes for the future. I won't be judgmental, and I can either offer advice, or not. And as always, conversations that take place in my study are your property, to do with as you please, not mine. I promise you my confidentiality.

Wishing you and yours a sweet and healthy Elul, and Shanah Tovah – a good New Year.

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