

High Holy Days Full of Symbolism, Cleansing

Saturday, September 16, 2006

Chuck Flagg-Morgan Hill Times



Congregation Emeth's Acting Rabbi Debbie Israel, left, Emeth member Mel Weisblatt, blowing the shofar, center, and Cantorial Soloist Mark Levy

Next week begins a 10-day period so sacred to Judaism that it is known as the "High Holy Days." This year, Rosh Hashanah begins on the evening of Sept. 22. (Most Jewish holidays begin at dusk because the dates are set according to the lunar calendar.) Sept. 23 is the first day of the new year in the Jewish calendar; on that day the year will be 5767.

Joining with Jews around the world, members of South County's Congregation Emeth will participate in ancient rituals that reflect the essence of being a Jew.

Traditional Jewish teaching often uses the image of God's Great Book of Judgment being opened at this time. During these "Ten Days of Awe," Jews may search their souls and repent, their fate being weighed in the balance.

"Sin" and "repentance" are important concepts during this time of year. In Hebrew, "sin" means to miss the mark; the same word used in archery when one misses the bull's-eye. And the Hebrew word for "repentance" means "turning or returning," conveying the image of straying off a path and finding the way back.

Debbie Israel, Acting Rabbi of Congregation Emeth, says that "emphasis is on self-evaluation, correcting mistakes. Especially in our interpersonal relationships, growing as individuals, and becoming more in touch with our relationship with the divine. People often see these 10 days as an opportunity for personal change and growth, for spiritual inner work, asking questions of themselves, like 'where was I last year compared to this year? What should I change to make myself whole or complete? What should I work on? Is there someone I owe an apology, someone I hurt or offended?' It is a time for introspection, for soul-searching."

A special prayer book, the "Machzor," is used during the High Holy Days. Its central theme is God's sovereignty while emphasizing God's justice and mercy. An essential feature of worship in this season is the blowing of a "shofar," an ancient trumpet-like instrument made from a carved ram's horn.

The shofar is rich in symbolism. The ram was caught in the thicket while Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, the instrument blown by Joshua in the desert to bring down the walls of Jericho. Some describe the loud, piercing noise as a reminder to "Wake up! Get serious now!"

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, comes on Oct. 2. Before this day is a major fast, a time for Jews to seek forgiveness from anyone they have wronged so that they can approach God with a clean slate. This Holy Day, which includes a 24-hour fast, begins the evening before at sundown with "Kol Nidre," a chant ritual that asks to revoke any vows made during the past year that are unfulfilled. The central part of the Yom Kippur service is an elaborate confession of sins, listed alphabetically.

Israel calls this "the most awesome, serious day, dramatically orchestrated to resemble a move toward death and sudden rescue." People often wear white for Yom Kippur, symbolic of a shroud or the garb of angels.

As for the Book of Life, she suggests that the language not be taken too literally. "If people haven't made the spiritual changes that they should, then they could be headed toward spiritual death. We cannot change laws of nature, but we can modify the harshness of the decree by transforming its meaning and impact through repentance, prayer and righteous deeds," Israel explained. "But the emphasis is more positive: How can I recover? Where can I be stronger? How can I feel more connected to God?"

The concluding service of Yom Kippur is "Ne'ilah" (meaning "Close the gate"). It represents the last chance for repentance and forgiveness during this holy day, although the ancient rabbis taught that God always welcomes repentance and is always ready to forgive. Legend has it that at this closing of the Gate of Heaven, each person's fate is sealed for the coming year. The climax of the service is a last sound of the shofar.

According to Israel, the High Holy Days are a 10-day period for Jews to do the "innerwork needed to arrive at a feeling of connectedness to God as a loving parent and to one another. By the end of Yom Kippur, we pray that we have come closer to reaching our moral potential."