

Rabbi's column

We enter into the *Yamim Noraim*, The Days of Awe, at a crucial and frightening time for our world. The attacks of 9/11 are now three years in the past, but no one knows what tomorrow, or the day after, will bring. The years since 9/11 have brought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unknown numbers, certainly in the thousands, of Afghanis and Iraqis are dead. Hundreds of American men and women have been killed. The threat of terrorism remains and grows.

On the domestic scene in our country, civil liberties have been systematically attacked. The religious right wing in our country is in the middle of a well-financed, passionate and energized campaign against gay people.

So much of the political situation, internationally and domestically, is grim. And we enter into the days of awe with the demand that we start by looking inward first. Despite our anxiety and fears about the world at large, we are required to continue to do *cheshbon nefesh* - an accounting of OUR souls. We don't get off the hook just because others are worse, or other situations more evil.

We must demand of ourselves an accounting. What acts of spoken violence have we committed? The main type of acts for which we ask forgiveness on Yom Kippur are acts of speech.

"We have defamed;

We have told lies;

We have improperly advised;

We have covered up the truth;

We have laughed in scorn:

For the wrong we have done before you through stupidity of speech

For the wrong we have done before you by expressions of contempt;

For the wrong we have done before you by deception of a friend;

*Lashon Hara* - evil speech literally - words as Heschel would say are neither kind nor necessary - lashon hara is a plague of our world, of our community.

And according to our tradition, one cannot pray to God for forgiveness on Yom Kippur if one has not directly asked forgiveness from the person offended. That means the person about whom you might have spoken, who does not even know what has been said. According to the Hafetz Haim, the great teacher about *lashon hara*, before Yom Kippur one must tell what was said ask for *mechilah*.

A famous story is told of someone who regretted that he had told much *lashon hara*. He went to a rabbi who told him to take a feather pillow up to the top of a hill and open it up. The man did that and returned to the rabbi who then told him to go collect the feathers. The man protested - "But rabbi, how could I collect all those feathers now?? The wind has dispersed them everywhere!" The rabbi said "so too, with *lashon hara*, the damage you do is sometimes impossible to repair - those comments and words are out into the world".

In this time before the Days of Awe, may we each have the strength to do the personal work we need to do.

May the world of 5765 find some peace and justice for our world. The small worlds and the big worlds.