

## Religion as Theater

### (Shabbat Shuvah)

When the Temple was standing, Rosh Hashanah to Shmini Atzeret was experienced as a single 22-day festival, an annual national festival for the Kingdom of Judea. Much of the population would gather in the capitol city, Jerusalem, for an extended vacation. The festival events were structured with this in mind, as an elaborate piece of participatory theater to be performed by the community as a whole. After the destruction of the Temple, this structure of events was largely preserved and remains the core of our present-day observances for the autumn holiday period.

It is a festival in five acts:

Act 1: Intentions (2 days of Rosh Hashanah, 7 Days of Awe)

Act 2: Purification (Yom Kippur, 25 hours)

*Intermission* (Break-Fast; refreshments available)

Act 3: Interlude (Building the Sukkah, 4 days)

Act 4: Contrasts--Self Denial and Celebration (Sukkot, 7 days)

Act 5: Climax and Resolution (Shmini Atzeret, 1 day, followed by raucous cast party)

To leave the festivities after Yom Kippur is like walking out at intermission. Yet this is what most American Jews do. That's unfortunate. It's a well-written play and it's hard to make sense of it if you don't stay to the end.

We begin on Rosh Hashanah proclaiming our good intentions, but we mostly avoid talking about the real question on our minds at the turn of a new year: Will we make it through to the next? We want to ask God for survival and sustenance, but we are not ready. Instead, we focus on general principles, at the lengthy and wordy Rosh Hashanah prayer services. During the subsequent Days of Awe (where we find ourselves now, on Shabbat Shuvah), we turn inward to examine ourselves and to try to determine how and to what extent we have failed to live according to those principles.

Yom Kippur is a purification ceremony. We express regret at having fallen short of our intentions. We clean the slate, by fasting (which purifies the body) and by asking for forgiveness (which purifies the conscience). However, purification is not an end in itself. It is preparation for what follows.

After intermission it is quite typical for plays and operas to have a change of setting. As the curtain rises we now have a pastoral scene. The first two acts were spent indoors, reciting prayers, contemplating with furrowed brows, pounding our chests confessing sins. Now we are outside, gathering building materials, and then building a sukkah. This is vigorous physical activity. There is not much opportunity here for contemplation and soul searching. Sweating, exhausted, but with a feeling of accomplishment, we stand back and behold the work of our hands. We feel proud--but then we start to feel rather ridiculous. This structure we have worked so hard on won't even keep out the rain, and we intend to abandon it after only seven days of use. I can picture the act ending with Koheleth walking out onto the stage and delivering a monologue: "I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and planted vineyards....I amassed silver and gold,... and oh, it was futile and pursuit of wind; there was no real value under the sun!" (Ec 2:4, 8, 11)

Sukkot is the most colorful and varied of the acts. Much of the time is spent living in a rickety hut exposed to the elements, contemplating and experiencing the temporary nature of human existence. Yet the

Torah calls Sukkot זמן שימחתנו, "the time of our rejoicing." We alternate between gloomy brooding and lively joyous celebrations, including festive meals with friends, family, and community, and bizarre, primitive fertility rituals at the morning synagogue services. This is a fascinating juxtaposition. We can only truly celebrate how amazing it is to be alive if we also, at the same time, appreciate how fortunate we are. Life is so tenuous. Security is a gift, not something owed to us. When the time comes to stand face to face with God and ask for a favor, we will now be able to do it with humility and with gratitude for past gifts.

The last act is Shmini Atzeret, a modest title meaning, approximately, "an additional eighth day of assembly." After 21 days of preparation, we gather as a community to formally issue a request for sustenance for the coming year. We express this metaphorically as תפילת גשם, "a prayer for rain." (In ancient Judea this would not have been just a metaphor.) This is a solemn ritual, performed in the morning prayer services. The prayer leader dresses in white, as on Yom Kippur, and the melodies shift back to the somber High Holidays nusach. This is the climax of the play. Everything until now has led to this. The ceremony is performed. Now we have done all we can. Now, whatever happens, we can accept our fate with equanimity. We end (as do many operas and musicals) with a happy song-and-dance number, Simchat Torah. In the Diaspora this is traditionally performed the day after Shmini Atzeret, and there is a tradition to continue having evening home celebrations for the rest of the week, until Shabbat Bereishit.

In talking to people about Judaism, I have been surprised to find that not everyone thinks of Jewish ritual as theater. It has long seemed to me quite obvious, but perhaps this is just because I was born in Hollywood, and many of my family members and friends of family have been involved in theater or in the film and television industry. I personally was able to find meaning in Jewish prayer and ritual only after I began to view it as a performance.

So what about the idea of prayer as a spontaneous and sincere conversation with God? My rational stance toward the universe does not allow me to have a conversation with a supernatural being. However, I can take a role in a play as a character who can talk with God. My brother is a professional actor, and I have often observed how he becomes the character he is playing for the duration of the play. By playing the role of someone having a conversation with God I can experience the emotions that someone would have during such an experience. The only real difference I can see between what a person having a spontaneous conversation with God is doing and what I am doing is that one of us is engaged in improvisational theater while the other is acting from a script.

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