

A NEW YEAR OF PEACE

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur bear many imprints. They are welcomed as symbols of another year of life, occasions for family gatherings, opportunities to enjoy the comradeship of fellow Jews in prayer – including those we didn't see since last year. New clothes, special foods, even a very special *lack* of food for all those who can observe Yom Kippur with the required full day fast.

Spiritually, the High Holidays offer us a chance to take stock of our behavior and resolve to improve. All the Torah lessons, the liturgy, the music and the preaching are intended to stimulate that effort.

This year, I suggest, let's put another imprint on our High Holiday experience. Let's make these days a peace conference.

No, I don't mean a "cease fire." And I'm not proposing that we invite any of our enemies to negotiate terms in between sounds of the shofar. I'm talking about **making peace with ourselves**.

Not always possible, and not often easy. Of course we are taught to start with *shalom bayis* – peace in the home. We need some comfort with our families. They are, after all, the reason we engage in our daily struggle. Couldn't they agree with us once in a while?

But even if they do, we are stuck with ourselves.

In fact you probably noticed as I have that many people who have no family conflicts – or who have no families – fight themselves constantly.

True, we can't avoid some inner struggle. The strife in the world around us bombards our consciousness and shatters our calm.

World strife hits us at the airport every time we go through a security check. Can we walk away from the conflict? Can we shut it out? Can we live in a cocoon? There's no doubt inside a cocoon. No doubt and no turmoil. Can we build one?

It's all fine to say "change the things I can change and accept those I cannot change." But sometimes it doesn't work, does it? Our daily interaction – with friends, with family, with co-workers or strangers – keeps reinforcing our doubt and our turmoil.

Compounding it all is one trend that is not in doubt. That trend is anti-Semitism. Again. The Muslim world incites it. Europe is poisoned with it. America cannot ignore it.

Will anything we do or say in this year's High Holiday services help us to stand firm amid the strife and antagonism we must face?

Then again there is the economic battle that we all fight. Can we relieve famine in Africa if we can't make ends meet here? Rising prices and shrinking payrolls don't produce much peace of mind, do they? We look for ways to cope, and we need that spiritual anchor beneath us.

Can Judaism supply each of us with a spiritual anchor?

Right about now there's a voice inside you saying "Come on, Rabbi, are you gonna tell me religion will solve any of these problems? Maybe religion IS

the problem. Certainly our enemies manipulate their religion against us. What can WE believe?"

Well? How about it? Did you hear it? Did I quote that inner voice pretty accurately?

My friends, that is the voice we have to make peace with.

To do that, we have to face our doubts. Maybe we doubt that getting body-searched in the airport is part of G-d's plan. That's a legitimate doubt. And maybe we doubt that the taxes we pay will buy us protection from the next terror attack. That's a legitimate doubt too. We can fight those doubts by implementing our own plan to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Or we can pretend there is no danger out there, and just go on as we did 20 years ago. Either way, we are dealing with reality on a public level.

We need to face our fears too. We see Israel fighting to survive in a hostile world, and maybe we doubt its chances. That's a real fear. Maybe we sense that all the Israel-bashing we see is basically anti-Semitism in a different uniform. When it comes to plain old Jew-hatred, remember the lessons of the Holocaust. *Sha-shtil* (Be quiet!) is no defense. Sometimes we need to circle the wagons: suspend the infighting and stand up for our own. Pride and integrity command respect, even from those who don't really like us. Now we are dealing with reality on a personal level.

Finally, we need to look at the Psalm of the season. It tells us we can triumph "If only I have faith that I will see the goodness of G-d in the land of the living."

In the land of the living. Not in some unknown heaven or dreaded hell. *Eretz haHayim* – the land of the living. We can feel the caressing shade of the Divine presence here and now. All it takes is an effort of faith. We can't expect G-d to solve all our problems for us, but faith helps. It gives us the anchor that our spirits need. The doubts and the problems fall into perspective when we make peace with ourselves.

Let's do it this New Year. *Shanah Tovah!*