

This coming Wednesday evening marks the beginning of the season known as the Jewish High Holy Days. Both Church and Synagogue distinguish between “sacred” and “profane,” between “holy” and “ordinary” days. My husband (“the rabbi”) and I have settled into an evening ritual on “ordinary” (non-Sabbath or holy day) nights. After our son has gone to bed, we turn on Netflix and watch yet one more installment of the award-winning TV drama, *Mad Men*. Afterwards, we might discuss what makes the different characters tick, how we appreciate one’s moral growth, or despise the actions of another. Since you see these characters over a long swath of time, it is remarkable to see how, with all of their pettiness, greed, lust, betrayal and envy, they can also evidence forgiveness, generosity, loyalty, and largeness of spirit. It is also remarkable that I can come to care for, even esteem, people who do things in the fictional screen world that I would be most disapproving of in real life. Is it really possible for human beings to drink so much, smoke so much, cheat on their spouses so much and still function reasonably well in the world? And yet the series is not unrealistic: it shows individuals struggling with money problems, sexism, racism, suicide, divorce, drinking problems, weight problems; an adolescent girl getting her first menstrual period—things that I certainly never saw on network TV when I was growing up!

I don’t yet know how it is all going to end, but there have been hints that the series might be moving towards a state of *blessing*. In the Jewish tradition a blessing (in Hebrew, *brakhah*) lifts us out of the realm of the ordinary into a state of holy awareness. By saying a blessing over the most ordinary thing—a glass of water or a piece of bread—we become aware that *all* of creation comes from God, from the realm of the holy. Through the practice of blessing we keep our connection to God throughout the day, whether in “holy” time or “ordinary” time. Which is not to say that we will ever see a character in *Mad Men* reciting a blessing at the water cooler...but we do see characters dig down into themselves to find a holy, compassionate core; we see them care for others even when those others may have hurt them or been overly-competitive with them in the past. We see some—but not all—of them, after years of angling for the best accounts, more exciting sexual partners, the corner office, etc.—finally realize that family, loyalty, friendship, and integrity are worth more than all of those other things—things which are temporal, shallow, and, in the end, empty.

I want to be able to write that *Mad Men*’s characters, like Dr. Seuss’ Grinch, or Dickens’ Scrooge, have miraculous transformations where their hearts grow “three sizes;” that once they wake up to what is holy and right, they are wholly transformed, redeemed—and able to “redeem” one another. And yet the series’ creator, Matthew Weiner, and his staff of writers has not allowed us that easy, feel-good way out...at least not so far. Rather, what we see instead are *glimpses of possibility*; we see that the same person who can be magnanimous, forgiving, or protective in one instance can be cold, heartless, and cruel the next. Which one is the real person? And we ask ourselves, “Are we like this?” After we have had crises, life-altering experiences that make us kinder, more heart-ful people—do we slide back to our unthinking, selfish sides so easily? Which one is our true self?

*Teshuvah*, the Hebrew word usually translated as “repentance,” literally means “return.” Our tradition teaches that when a person “repents,” they are turning themselves around and “coming home” to the person that God created them be—to their truest, most authentic selves. But it is not enough to change our direction; we have to open our hearts to forgive those who have hurt us, and to grow large enough to overlook the foibles of those who annoy us in the everyday. We have to desire “blessings” not just for

ourselves but for the whole world. Will the morality tale of *Mad Men* end with a “redeemed world,” a final scene of forgiveness, reconciliation, fulfillment and blessing? Will the writers *allow* us this happiness? What about our own lives? Are we not the writers of our *own* scripts? Jewish tradition teaches us that it is up to *us* to return, to “come home” to our most empowered, authentic selves. But we slip back all too easily. I am grateful for the “holy” guidance of our tradition and holidays that point us in the direction of blessing and fulfillment in our lives; but I am also grateful for “profane” sources of reflection about our human condition. *Mad Men* may seem like a soap opera to some, but to me it has become a kind of holy drama (even a “passion play”), an aid for taking inventory on our own lives, our society, our triumphs, our failings; a warning-tale to those who stumble blindly through life without any thought for others; a tale which whispers to us of the possibility of a kinder, more beneficent, “blessed” world. As we in the Fall River Jewish community celebrate our New Year, I wish for all South Coast residents blessings for lives filled with love, meaning, fulfillment and glimpses of redemption.

Shoshana Brown is the co-spiritual leader and music director at Temple Beth El in Fall River.