

Where are We?

By Rabbi Mark Elber

As I walk out my door and see the red, orange, and yellow leaves it's obvious that we're in the thick of autumn. Personally that always means that the most intense time of the Jewish calendar during which the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) occur, has just passed. That ten day period encompassing the High Holidays is seen as a time of taking an accounting of one's self and one's soul. What kind of person am I and what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of world do we live in and what kind of world do we want to live in? The New Year is a time of sober reflection and self-evaluation. It fits well with the season. We see the stunning beauty of autumn's colors, but we know that winter looms just beyond it.

Recently I saw a wonderful production at Bristol Community College of *Les Miserables*. I was very impressed with the abundance of local talent. One of the major themes in the musical is the plight of the underprivileged, of the poor, and the injustice in society which was true in France in the early to mid 1800's and probably remains true of most, if not all, societies. What kind of society do we want to live in? What are our values and do we live up to them?

Though injustice remains ineradicable to some degree in virtually every society, the foundation of our society (and others') retains the ideal of institutionalizing means to overcome the inequalities that exist. One of those institutions is free elections. Truly free elections depend on a lot of things. First of all they depend on an informed electorate that exercises its right to vote. That's not as easy an achievement as it sounds. To a large extent today the public is exposed to, or bombarded by, sound bites that evade addressing issues with depth, but rather try to appeal emotionally to voters in order to sway them. The most susceptible to these type of ads will always be those who don't have, or don't make, the time to examine the issues more thoroughly. These types of campaign ads also are greatly determined by those who can fund them – there's not an even playing field – finances call the shots. But despite our limitations, we have an enormous amount for which to be grateful.

There are freedoms and values of our society that we may take for granted, but which many other societies lack. If you recall those amazing, eloquent, and revolutionary words of our Declaration of Independence you will immediately be struck

with the recognition that in today's world many societies live far from these ideals: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Freedom of the press, freedom of religion, separation of church and state, the rights of the individual – all of these are clearly not universally honored. The rights of the individual always have to be balanced with the responsibilities of the individual towards society. Keeping a balance between one's individual rights and responsibilities towards society is again, crucial, but not always a given. It's obvious that our society has struggled for centuries with the concept that all "men" or better yet, all "people," are created equal.

With the fall season and the Jewish holidays that occur this time of year, approximately two weeks after Yom Kippur we celebrate Simkhat Torah (The Rejoicing over the Torah) during which we both finish the yearly cycle of reading the Five Books of Moses and begin it anew. So we have just read the sections on the creation of the universe and the creation of Adam (whose name means "Human") and Eve (whose name means "Life"). I always like to remind people that these stories are not meant to be history, but rather attempt to teach a much deeper truth than history. The claim that Adam (i.e. humans) are created in G!d's image and that we all descend from one couple implies within it that all people are created equal. A little further in the story, after Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they try to hide from the Divine. G!d is depicted as asking Adam the perennial question "*Ayeka*" (Where are you?) – a question we must always ask ourselves. Where are we in our lives? Are we living according to values that honor life, the earth, and its inhabitants? Are we creating and protecting the kind of world we want our descendents to inherit?