



## **Rosh Hashanah 1/Yom Kippur – 5777 Facebook**

**By Rabbi Howard Lifshitz**

A man decides to stop using social media and instead is determined to make friends without the benefit of Facebook but still using its methods. So he leaves home to take a walk and as he meets people he tells them what he has eaten, how he feels, what he did last night, and what he will do tomorrow. Then he gives them pictures of his family, his dog, and his garden. He also listens to their conversations and tells them he loves them. It works! Soon he does have followers — two police officers and a psychiatrist!

Facebook, one of the most popular of social media, is amazing. It has more than one and a half billion users, allows people to share details of their lives, and facilitates rapid communication with others. Sharing pictures, travel plans, arranging meetings and dates, and finding all kinds of information and advertising are a easy to do on it. With it, we can connect with our children and grandchildren no matter where they are, new interests can be explored, opinions can be exchanged, and we can follow happenings throughout the world. There is no doubt that Facebook and other social media play a transformative role in our society.

Today I would like us to imagine — *kivaychol*, as if this were possible — God's Facebook page, what His postings might tell us about Him, about His concerns, and about what He wants us to know of Him. Instead of just imagining that, let us think of our mahzor as His Facebook page and the record of His posts, and find therein beliefs that can sustain and guide us.

First, the liturgy conveys the message that God created us with free will. From the first choices that Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac, and Joseph and his brothers made, through the choices we make today, we decide how we will act. It is up to us to choose wisely among the opportunities and challenges we face. Contemplating where we have gone astray and understanding that we have been fashioned with the ability to change, we acknowledge that we have the freedom to chose whether or not to do teshuvah, to return to God's path and to live more in accordance with His will. It is up to us; the choice is ours.

Second, the pages of the prayerbook reveal that God loves us. With love He gave us Torah and mitzvot, the Sabbath and holidays. He recalls fondly the love we shared in earlier days. With love He remembers us and keeps us as the apple of his eye (Ps. 17). *Ve-aahavta* — you shall love the Lord with all your heart and soul and might — isn't that God yearning for His love and concern for us to be reciprocated with our own love and concern for Him? The Divine One wants there to be a love match between us and Him. So when the prophet tell us that the Lord calls out to His people, but no one responds (Is 50:2), we can relate to His sorrowful disappointment. That is why, as Heschel writes, that "God is in search of man." Because He

loves us, He wants us to listen for His voice and to return to Him. Every day He steps toward us, awaiting our first steps toward Him. When we make even the smallest move to Him, He will quickly draw us so close that we are renewed and experience inner peace.

Third, scrolling through the pages of the machzor, attending to the words of exhortation, the prophetic readings, and the poetry of the piyyutim, it is clear that God has a purpose for our existence. The mission statement He sets before us is to be both an *am kadosh* and a *goy kadosh*, to be *holy people* and to create *a holy nation*. He wants us individually, personally, to live holy lives — lives of righteousness and kindness, of service to others, and of integrity, worship and sanctity — as a way of serving God. He summons us to show our love and attachment to Him by fulfilling mitzvot and by living Torah in our relationships with others as well as with Him. In these ways we expand His presence wherever we are.

God's mission is also addressed to us as the collectivity known as Israel — a call for Jewish continuity with a purpose. We Jews are to create a society whose qualities are such that about it will be applied the words, "How beautiful are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel (Numb 24:5). The goal of our national existence is to strive to realize here in our world, the kind of civilization imagined above, the kind that God Himself planned for the world. United as *Yisrael*, fashioning ethical communities and endeavoring to set high moral standards, we can influence, as we join with other communities, the direction of human history and enlarge the effluence of Divine light.

We are given mitzvot to fulfill to assist us in this task. Because we have the capacity to do so, we are commanded to establish a society in which justice and freedom are found, in which we honor learning and creativity, honest labor and humble love. We are called to speak the truth, to safeguard each person's dignity, and to seek peace as we pursue our mission. In these ways we Israel, by our behavior, will be proclaiming, the oneness of God, at all times and places, whether we are sitting in our house or walking on the road, lying down or standing up.

We Jews produce scholars and scientists, lawyers and literary figures, architects and able politicians. Among us are those who open our eyes to beauty and wonder and those who work hard and accomplish much. But God's mission statement asks more than that of us. It does not demand that we be saints; instead it summons us to be *tzadikim*, righteous ones who, by our words and deeds, add to the goodness found within us and around us. The *machzor* proclaims that we, as individuals and as the Jewish nation, should take that mission to heart and redirect and refashion our lives.

You may know that a feature of Facebook is *friending*. Ask people to be your friend, and if they accept, even more information can be shared with more people. Well then, consider that God continually sends out an invitation to the entire world. God posted His *friend request* to us when He offered us Torah, a blueprint for fulfilling our mission. My question today is, "Have we made it clear by the way we live, that we have chosen to accept that friend request or that instead we have chosen to ignore it or block it?"

By our presence at this service, are we indicating our acceptance of God's invitation to be His friend? Do we comprehend that God watches our Facebook pages? What does He see in

them? Our postings will reveal how seriously we take, or how well we are fulfilling, that mission which was revealed through Torah and the wisdom of our faith? As we pass before Him and He reviews our life-pages, He will be able to discern what is truly important to us. He will learn what we spend time on. He will see with whom we associate and what our real goals are. On Facebook we post pictures, travelogues and political opinions, what sporting events, or concerts we attend, and when our birthdays are. But what do those pages say about our commitment to the sacred tasks that God gave and that Israel accepted at Sinai? Perhaps being here, assembled as a community on this holy day, will move us to so live that our pages will testify that we take our mission seriously and that doing this brings us great joy.

Let us choose more wisely what we eat, how much we work, how much time we spend with our children, and how willingly we accept the challenge to live ethically in every sphere of our lives. Let us choose not to be swayed by bigots or by greed, by the desire for popularity and celebrity, nor by self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Let us fill our pages with words that tell of our acts of loving kindness, that record our responsible decisions, that convey that our speech is truthful and respectful, and that reveal that our minds and hearts open to others.

We are to respond to God's love for us by loving others — not only the people we already know, but also those who too often are unknown and unheard. That love must impel us to do what we can to calm the strife in our homes, the violence in our streets, and the anger that distorts our behavior and corrupts public discourse. To love God means to love all who are part of His creation as surely as it means praising Him with all our heart, soul and might.

Jewish continuity, the promise that Judaism and the people Israel will never disappear, is another essential part of our mission and requires our serious commitment. Therefore the role of Jewish observance in our life needs to be strengthened, we must do more to support Jews throughout the world, and more actively champion the State of Israel. Becoming active in organizations serving Jewish needs here and abroad, in those that foster love for Israel, and in those that speak up for Israel, are additional ways to fulfill our mission

So on our own Facebook pages let us write of new mitzvot that we are doing and of the deeper understanding of Judaism that we gain through Jewish learning and experiences. Let them show that we nourish our souls by becoming more active in the synagogue, and that because we have a deeper understanding of Judaism's principles and practices, we find the light of our faith shining more intensely within us, guiding us as we go about our mission.

If we love God, if we love Judaism, if we love the Jewish community and the State of Israel, let us take these kinds of actions which will then be written *besefer chayim* in the Book of Life that is before God this day, a book far more significant than Facebook. May Adonai see in our pages signs that we are trying to fulfill His mission. Because of He sees there, may He inscribe us for a life of connection, of true meaning, and of lasting joy. Then this will be for us and all those we love a shanna tova u'metukah — a good and sweet new year.

Amen