**Turning and Returning to our Dreams**

**By Rabbi Maurice Harris**

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*Teshuva*, in Jewish tradition, is the process of moral self-examination and the “turning” from patterns of behavior or thought that cause harm to self and others to patterns that are healthy and good. During the High Holy Days, we focus communally on *teshuva* in our individual and collective relationships. The fact that we humans have the ability to change our habits – and that we sometimes do – is one of our great sources of hope. To believe that we can change even deeply entrenched behavior patterns often requires an act of faith. This can be a faith in a God or Higher Power who helps us change for the better, or a faith in the surprising possibilities of human nature.

It is that faith, which can be as simple as a willingness to act on a possibility, that we can draw strength from now as we continue to work for a different kind of Middle East during confusing and frightening times. Right now, peace seems elusive or even impossible. And yet, our tradition implores us to chase after it, to pursue it. Midrash (interpretive rabbinic literature) states that ordinarily we are expected to fulfill a commandment only when the opportunity arises to perform it. If you find a lost object, for example, then you’re obligated to try to return it to its owner. But you don’t have to spend your Sunday afternoon walking around your neighborhood looking for lost objects to return. But the commandment to work for peace is different. We *are* called upon to exert ourselves in the search for peace. The commandment is to “seek peace and pursue it.” This is understood to mean “seek peace” wherever you happen to be and “pursue it” if it is elsewhere.

Right now we are saddened by where we happen to be. The aftermath of war is where we happen to be. Civilian deaths by the hundreds is where we happen to be. A furious Israeli electorate possibly ready to run into the arms of the right wing is where we happen to be. An Islamic and Arab street cheerleading a man called Nasrallah who promotes shocking anti-Semitic ideas is where we happen to be. Never before in my lifetime has it been more important to realize that we must pursue peace because it truly is elsewhere.

“Who is mighty? One who makes an enemy into a friend.” *(Avot de Rabbi Natan)* We are a long way from this dream, and yet this is the dream I will not give up. Even this moment in history is pregnant with the possibility of teshuva – of turning and returning to a path that realizes our dream of co-existence and security for Israel, for Palestine, indeed – for all the children of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Let’s not lose sight of the outcome we’re working for, even in the pain of this season. The more we can point to the outcome we believe in – a two-state future with mutual recognition and respect, an end to occupation, and an accepted place in the Middle East for Israel – the more we can give voice to the shofar’s call to awaken to reality, to awaken to better possibilities, to awaken to a future all of us can live with.

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