



Yom Kippur 2006

“WHAT DOES PLUTO HAVE TO DO WITH IT?”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

It is customary on Yom Kippur in some congregations for the rabbi to come before the community and ask forgiveness for her sins and transgressions in the year gone by. For us, who do not subscribe to a hierarchical arrangement between rabbi and congregation, it is more suitable that we ask each other for forgiveness. But more than that, we use this time to assess how we came to these errors in the first place and what we can do to minimize their reoccurrence.

In my case, I am at least relieved to know the source of my wrongdoings. I learned recently that ever since the erstwhile planet Pluto was demoted in status, all of us Scorpios – including Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, and Condoleeza Rice, have become a bit untethered. The rest of you would do well to beware of our behavior. Apparently Pluto had something to do with keeping us in line, but now we are more likely to become explosive and volatile, which, of course, we wouldn't be otherwise.

I'm really not one much for astrology, but I was taken by the comment of Shelley Ackerman, columnist for the spirituality Web site Beliefnet.com, who wrote, “Whether he's a planet, an asteroid, or a radioactive matzo ball, Pluto has proven himself worthy of a permanent place in all horoscopes.”

So, while the Astronomical Union stood in judgment of poor Pluto and found him – or her – wanting, astrologers worldwide are standing firmly by Pluto and find him – or her – not guilty and will continue to regard the icy orb as a full-blown planet.

Now several months before Pluto's demotion, I received a promotion – I think – when last spring, at a Shabbat in May, we celebrated my installation as rabbi of The City Congregation. Three days later, however, my job was temporarily put on hold, because I had been called for Jury Duty downtown.

I welcome that experience and consider it my civic responsibility to participate. The perk of a long lunch hour in Chinatown is always an attraction and the new comfortable chairs in the jury pool waiting room make the whole thing practically enjoyable.

When I first went years ago, all the instructions were done by the clerk. Now, like the airlines that show a movie on how to tighten your seat belt, there is a handy video that lays it all out for you. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it.

I admit I usually tune these things out, but I took note – as a newly installed rabbi – of some of the language. We were being called to service. We would be standing in judgment. We would be enacting justice.

One actor in the video, playing the role of a juror, asked, “What if it is a technical case? How will I be qualified to examine the evidence?”

The answer, provided by the narrator: “All you need is everyday common sense.”

Oh my, I thought, for some people, dare I say many, that's a pretty tall order.

It got worse from there. We were told, of course, that we would be expected to remain impartial.

And I wondered, Is there truly such a thing as impartiality?

What about tribal loyalties? You know, my clan is your clan, my color is your color, my God is your God, my secular humanistic principles are your secular humanistic principles, that sort of thing.

Or what about unspoken biases? Like cops don't lie, or cops can't be trusted, or guilty before being proven innocent despite being told just the opposite.

And what about idiosyncratic mood? Wake up crabby and you're likely to be short-tempered, impatient, not listen carefully, and maybe even be eager to rush to faulty judgment.

On the other hand, get up rested, escape all strife in the morning, and you'll be patient, considerate, perhaps give someone the credit of the doubt that wasn't even deserved.

I was part of the voir dire for one case, where the judge and the lawyers interview the prospective jurors and select who they want to disqualify. You'll be pleased to know that when I had my chance to identify myself I didn't pass up the opportunity to make a plug for The City Congregation. I'm on a mission to spread the word and my little pitch got the attention of at least one fellow Jew – who had shlepped in from Westchester – and came up to chat with me and afterwards to find out more.

I didn't make the cut for that jury so I was released after a few days, but I have been thinking about some of those themes ever since. After all, most of the time we're not in the court house, but we're still constantly standing in judgment – of strangers, of colleagues, of our family, of small planets, and, hopefully, also of ourselves.

That last assignment – of self-assessment – is the one we've especially given ourselves for today. It is also the assignment that we can assume everyday. And take on with common sense and impartiality.

Here are three questions to consider:

One, are we too lenient on ourselves and let ourselves off the hook, or are we too harsh and unforgiving, and expect more of ourselves than is realistic?

Two, in the cadence of a familiar African-American preacher, do we need to lighten up – or tighten up?

And three, can we Scorpios get away with blaming it all on Pluto, or do we take responsibility for the planetary mood shifts within us – and the same goes for everyone else?

Today is a day for justice.

Today we stand in judgment.

Today is a day for asking hard questions and look inward for honest answers.

Again, Shanah tova. Happy New Year.