



A resource created in conjunction with Rabbi Alan Lew's book, [This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared](#), intended for use in line with the arc of the High Holy Day season
Compiled by Rabbi Dusty Klass

PRE-WORK

SOUL WORK: Chapter 1 - The soul stretches out to contain itself

*"Every soul needs to express itself. Every heart needs to crack itself open. Every one of us needs to move from anger to healing, from denial to consciousness, from boredom to renewal. These needs did not arise yesterday. They are among the most ancient of human yearnings, and they are fully expressed in the...great journey we make between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur."
(Lew, page 9)*

Four questions to meditate on as you begin this process, drawn from page 32 of Naomi Levy's book "Einstein and the Rabbi":

- What has my soul been trying to say to me that I've been ignoring?
- What activities and experiences nourish my soul that I don't do enough of?
- What does my soul want to repair that my ego is too stubborn or too fearful to repair?
- What does my soul want me to reach for?"

TESHUVA: Chapter 2 - Everywhere he went, he was heading for home

*If you are moving along the circumference of a circle, it might seem at first as if the starting point is getting farther and farther away, but actually it is also getting closer and closer.
(Lew, page 24)*

*“When man sins he creates a distance between himself and God. To sin means to remove oneself from the presence of the Master of the Universe...the whole essence of the precept of repentance is longing, yearning, pining to return again. (Solevetchik).” So Tisha b’Av, the day when we remember our estrangement from God, is the beginning of the process of t’shuva. This very estrangement is the engine that drives us on our journey back home, back to God.
(Lew, page 25)*

*Every moment of our lives our suffering, our clinging to our lives, drives us out of our lives – away from home – and every moment, our awareness brings us back – returns us to ourselves, because we need to return, need to come back. Consciousness and the passage of time heal.
(Lew, page 30)*

For Reflection:

- What transgressions do you seem to circle back to most often in your life? How have you confronted (or avoided) those transgressions over the years?
- What harmful or upsetting patterns have you noticed in your relationships (with romantic partners, friends, family members, and yourself)? What might be underneath those patterns?

WEEK ONE: August 18th

ELUL 1: Chapter 4 - The horn blew and I began to wake up

Reading: Pages 64-75

“Every moment contains a blessing and a curse. Everything depends on our seeing our lives with clear eyes, seeing the potential blessing in each moment as well as the potential curse, choosing the former, forswearing the latter. (Lew, pages 65-66)

Exercise: Make a list all of the potential blessings and potential curses in this exact moment. Which of the blessings might you choose and which of the curses might you forswear?

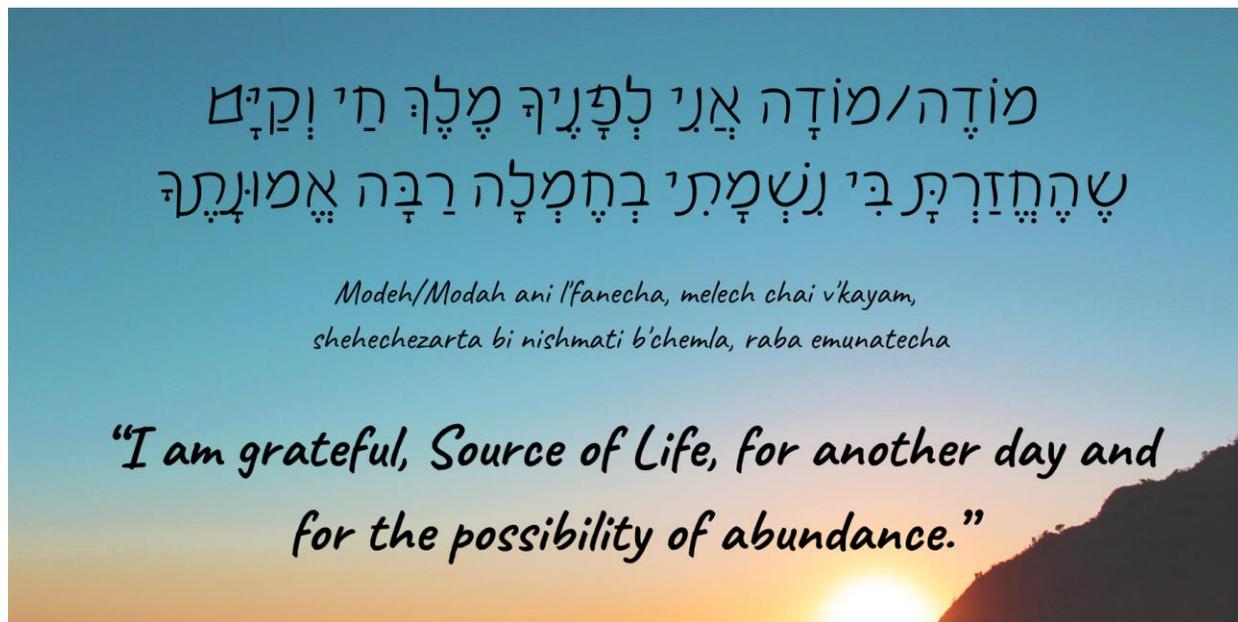
Rabbi Lew describes three methods for *Cheshbon HaNefesh*: prayer, meditation, focus.

Exercise: Choose one method. Use the tool corresponding to that method to help you practice. Commit to practicing once a day for a full week.

PRAYER

*One of the deepest potentials of prayer is that it can be a way we come to know ourselves.
(Pages 68-70)*

Print out the following blessing or write the words out on a piece of paper. Tape it to your bathroom mirror. Recite it at least once daily, the first time you notice it after waking up.¹



MEDITATION

Meditation helps us inhabit ourselves more deeply...but it [also] helps us to see that we are not merely our individual selves, but part of something much more vast as well. (Pages 70-72)

Set aside 5-10 minutes (put it in your calendar if that will help). Find a place where you can sit comfortably. Set a timer for the number of minutes you've chosen. Follow the below outline, a meditation using the words of Lamentations 5:21 (*Hashiveinu*).

- 1-2 minutes: Settle in, attend to your breath. Breathe in, breathe out.
- 2-4 minutes: As you inhale and exhale, repeat the following phrase (out loud or to yourself)
 - Inhale: *Turn us toward You, Adonai,*
 - Exhale: *and help us return.*
- 1-2 minutes: Inhale, and offer the following as you exhale:
 - Renew our days, again.*
- 1-2 minutes: Sit with whatever happened in these last 3-7 minutes.

¹ Check out this beautiful article from Rabbi Deborah Waxman, whose translation I used in the graphic.
<http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/modeh-ani-as-a-means-for-cultivating-resilience>

FOCUS

The truth of our lives is reflected in everything we do, and if we focus on even one small part of our lives, it brings up the entire truth of it (Pages 72-76)

Choose one aspect of your life to pay attention to. Rabbi Lew suggests money, sex, or eating, but if those feel too large, focus in on something smaller. Some additional suggestions: your phone – time spent using it, your feelings while using it for various tasks. Bodily functions – what counts as part of this category for you? Time spent outdoors/indoors.

Document that one aspect of your life fully for one week. Refrain, as much as possible, from judgment, seeking simply to increase your awareness about that one aspect of your life.

WEEK TWO: August 25th

ELUL 2: Chapter 4 - The horn blew and I began to wake up

Reading: Pages 76-85

“Is the world really torn and dark, or does it just appear that way to us because we are taking it in through a torn mind and a hardened heart?” (Lew, page 85)

Questions for reflection:

- What are the loose ends in my life? How is my mind torn?
- Where are the places my mind keeps wanting to go?
- What is the unfinished business in my life? What have I left undone?

WEEK THREE: August 31st

ELUL 3: Chapter 4 - The horn blew and I began to wake up

Reading: Pages 85-92

“Our desire for the apple in the Garden of Eden got us kicked out of Eden, but it also propelled us into history, and if we try to squelch it, or bury it, we might stop being productive. History might grind to a halt.” (Lew, page 89)

Questions for reflection:

- Do you have impulses or desires that scare you? What are they? Why do they scare you?
- What might it look like to, as Lew puts it, “strip them of their exotic dress” (90)? What is underneath those desires?

WEEK FOUR: September 8th

SELICHOT: Chapter 5 – This is real and you are completely unprepared

Reading: Pages 93-112

This is what we call heartbreak. Heartbreak is precisely the feeling that we have done our best, we have given it our all, but it hasn't been enough. Not nearly enough....So what do we do at a moment like this, when we become so painfully aware that there is nothing we can do at all?" (Lew, pages 107 and 110)

Rabbi Lew offers three responses to the question posed in the above quote: first, we must come together (110). Second, we must make confession (111). And third, we must actively participate in the ritual provided through the various prayer services of this season (111).

Questions for reflection:

- How are you going to show up – how might you commit to being part of us coming together, even in this year of physical distancing?
- What do you need to confess? To whom?

Exercise: Plan out and begin to build your *mikdash me'at*, your home sanctuary. Feel free to use the Creating your Own Sanctuary on TBECLTgateway.com for help in shaping your space. Take notes (or sketch it out!) in the box below.

WEEK FIVE: September 15th

ROSH HASHANA: Chapter 6 – The horn blows, the gates swing open, and we feel the winds of heaven

Reading: Pages 113-150

“As I sat in the living room that Shabbat, I realized something else I hadn’t realized before: my father was about as beautiful as it is possible for a human being to be down there on that basketball court. It was the only time I ever knew him to be comfortable saying, “This is me. With all my limitations, with all the loss and suffering my life has dealt me, this is exactly who I am.” Sitting there in the living room, I could see that radiant, open, laughing face of his, a face transformed by self-forgiveness.” (Lew, page 126)

Question for reflection:

- Is there a time in your life when you felt like you could say: “This is me. With all my limitations, with all the loss and suffering my life has dealt me, this is exactly who I am.” How might you imagine creating more moments in your life when you can say that?

“One Sunday, I received two phone calls – the first concerned a death that had just occurred on 27th Ave on the north side of Golden Gate Park and the second concerned a birth that had just occurred on 27th Ave on the south side of the park...my wife wrote: ‘these things are on the same continuum (27th Ave), but there is a park in between, a wild and beautiful place without streets and numbers. Flowers bloom there, and there are lakes where egrets wade. The cypresses are dark and cool. It is a beautiful place, as large and deep as a dream. But I hurry through there almost daily on my way too and from the places where the streets are numbered.’” (116-117)

Questions for reflection:

- What are you hurrying toward? What are you distracted by?
- What might you be missing as a result?

SOLO WORK

****Note:** We will not actively be focusing on Chapter Seven as part of the reading group**

YAMIM NORAIM: Chapter 7 - What the soul does while the gates are still open

Reading: Pages 151-175

“Real spiritual transformation invariably takes a long time to manifest itself in our lives...When Jacob has his great vision of the ladder and realizes he has been visited by God, he exclaims out loud, “My God! God has been in this place all along and I never knew it!” From this moment of epiphany, we expect he will be changed. We are disappointed when he continues to behave like the same manipulative schmo he has always been. But when we look at the larger arc of Jacob’s life, we see that this vision really does effect a profound change in him. It’s just that this change isn’t evident right away. It takes more than twenty years to take root.” (154-155)

Questions for reflection:

- Where can you look back and see ways in which you and your relationships with others have transformed? See below exercise for help in responding to this question.

Exercise: Set aside a full hour and pull out your photo albums (or scroll to the very beginning of your photos, wherever you store them digitally). Take a walk through your pictures. Take time to remember who you were and what was important to you during the time periods in which the various photos were taken. Give yourself a moment to honor the relationships you had with the people in those photos. Let it be okay (if it truly is okay) that you are no longer in relationship – Let it be part of your transformation. And if it is not okay, let that be okay, too.

“And this is the simplest and most frightening truth about all this business. Anger is a choice. Boredom is a choice. Fear is a choice...we are responsible for the state of our own consciousness. / Choose life so that you may live...this is the great imperative of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, those days when we stand poised between life and death. While the gates are open, we can transform deadness into life...” (159-160, 175)

Questions for reflection:

- What choice(s) is/are leaving you feeling “dead”? How might you reframe that choice or make a new one to give yourself more life?

WEEK SIX: September 22nd

****Note:** While we have offered reflections for each of the chapters that speak to aspects of Yom Kippur, there is no requirement that you read any particular chapter in order to participate in our check-in! Feel free to choose any one of the below chapters, or none at all!**

KOL NIDREI: Chapter 8 – The soul hears its name being called

Reading: Pages 176-211

“Many of us are afraid to be who we really are...we sense that once we have risen up, we will begin to fall away. Once we have spawned, we will begin to die. Many of us would rather try to keep our lives unexpressed, in potential, because we believe that if we don’t express our lives, we can hold on to them...so we never make that joyous leap. We remain weighted down by the burden of our unexpressed dreams.” (182-183)

Questions for reflection:

- What emotions do you feel when you consider what it means/might mean to be in the “second half” of your life?
- What are your unexpressed dreams? What would it look like for you to make that joyous leap?

“Kol Nidre...calls the soul back to itself, a prayer that calls the soul to its real home, and that home is always in something larger than itself. We are Avaryonim. We are incomplete and imperfect and cannot survive without a spiritual community that can make us whole – that can give us what we need, what we don’t have. And what we need most of all is to give. We need to give what we have an someone else does not.” (210-211)

Questions for reflection:

- What do you have to offer, and how might you give it?
- What do you need, and how might you ask for it?

YOM KIPPUR: Chapter 9 – Death and Yom Kippur atone

Reading: Pages 212-255

“I called them up to apologize, ...and they forgave me....But believe me, this is written in the book of my life. It is written indelibly and it’s sealed as well. I could ask them for forgiveness, but I couldn’t ask them to undo what had happened. No one could do that. Nor could anyone undo the hurt they experienced or the disillusionment of the young woman.”

“So why even bother to ask forgiveness? Why make kaparah? That behavior needs to be covered over precisely because it will always be out there. Their hurt needs to be covered over. It was like an exposed wound, an open sore, and it needed to be covered over by an acknowledgement that they had been hurt, by a validation of what they had experienced, by a corroboration from me that I had hurt them.”

Questions for reflection:

- When has someone’s apology helped cover over a wound for you? When have you apologized for something even though you know you will never be able to “take back” what you did? How did that feel?

“[On Yom Kippur], we say, “I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have done wrong. I have done something terribly hurtful.” and we say precisely what it is. We read the book we don’t want to read. I have done this and I have done that, and I acknowledge it is irreversible, it can never be undone, but I cover it over now. I resolve to begin anew.”

Questions for reflection:

- What resonates with you about this understanding of ‘kaparah’? What challenges you?

NEILAH: Chapter 10 – The gates clang shut

Reading: Pages 256-262

No quotes or questions. The chapter is short and sweet.

Read and enjoy, and know that I, too, would go into spiritual battle with you all as my army any day of the week.

****NOTE: No Official Group Meeting on Tuesday
September 29th****

WEEK EIGHT: October 6th

Sukkot: Epilogue – The stars are shining on my head

Reading: Pages 263-272

“Perhaps this special joy is precisely the joy of being stripped naked, the joy of being flush with life, the joy of having nothing between our skin and the wind and the starlight, nothing between us and the world.” (265)

Questions for reflection:

- When have you felt this joy? What came together to make that moment of joy possible?

Exercise: Get naked. No, really. Get naked, by yourself, somewhere you feel safe being naked (even if that simply means hopping into the shower). Close your eyes and focus in, for just a few minutes, on what it feels like to be barrierless, to have nothing between your skin and the world.

When you are finished, offer a blessing – choose your own words, or use the words below:

*Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu Melech haolam,
asher yatzar et haadam b'chochma.*
**Blessed are you, Adonai, Ruler of the Universe,
who formed the human body wisely.**

“What sex and agriculture have in common is that they point simultaneously to both the power and the impotence of the human condition. We have no idea how to form a human life. We can't make it happen by ourselves, yet we are absolutely indispensable to the process. We have no idea how a seed bears fruit. We can't make that happen either. Yet if we don't plant the seed and nurture it and water it and harvest it, no fruit will ever come. These things can't happen without us, but neither can we make them happen on our own.” (270-271)

Questions for reflection:

- What might you plant for this coming year?
- What are you willing to nurture, knowing that no growth is certain, and all growth requires a bit of faith?