

Erev Rosh Hashanah
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The Spiritual Work of this Year

A Hasidic tale tells of a man who was so forgetful that when he woke up in the morning he could not remember where he had placed his clothes the night before. His forgetfulness caused him such stress that he began to have trouble falling asleep in anticipation of the difficulty he would face upon waking. One night, he was struck by an idea that he believed would solve his problems. He took a pencil and a piece of paper and began to make a list. As he took off each item of clothing, he would write down exactly where he was putting it. He then laid the note on his nightstand and much to his surprise, upon crawling under the covers, immediately fell asleep.

In the morning, when he cracked open his eyes, he saw the list and began to read. Pants – folded on chair; and there they were. Shirt – hung behind the door – and there it was. Shoes – at the foot of the bed – and there they sat. He went down the list, item by item, and soon was dressed and ready for the day. But suddenly, the man gasped. Moving his hands up and down his body he whispered, “Here are my pants, here is my shirt, my shoes...but where am I?” He looked and he looked, but he could not find himself.¹

Perhaps, you have been feeling something like this man lately. You manage to get dressed and go about your day, but you just don’t feel like yourself. Or maybe, you feel like you are not living the life you intended to live or doing the work you meant to do.

The last year and a half have left many of us feeling lost and searching for ourselves. To begin with, the pandemic has upended so many of our routines and prevented us from living what we used to call our “normal lives.” And on top of that, as the information we know about the pandemic changes at lightening speed, we spend countless hours reading and talking about the pandemic, hours planning and re-planning events, hours considering and then reconsidering what we are comfortable doing and where and with whom we are comfortable being... It is no wonder that we feel out of place and out of sorts.

And now, we are celebrating the start of a New Year and are meant to engage in the rituals of these holy days...and it feels exceptionally hard. It is hard that some of us are here in the sanctuary and some of us are out there. It is hard that we cannot greet each other with hugs and kisses. It is hard that we cannot be led in prayer by the full voices of our choir and bring dozens of people up onto the bimah.

But I don’t want to speak about the logistics of the High Holy Days. I assure you, we have had enough meetings about the logistics. I want to speak instead about the internal, soul-searching work of the High Holy Days, because that too feels uniquely difficult this year. At the beginning of the month of Elul, when I started my own spiritual preparations for the High Holy Days, I found myself feeling frustrated, and even angry. Because when I began to take an accounting of the last year, when I began to reflect on the goals I had set for myself last Rosh Hashanah, on the projects I imagined I would complete here at work and at home, on the relationships I believed I would strengthen or begin... I kept coming up short. And I knew that

¹ Adapted from *Hasidic Tales*, Rabbi Rami Shapiro.

our traditions were not meant to leave me feeling defeated. That is no way to enter a brand-new year.

And that's when I began thinking about the need for us to approach the personal work of this High Holy Days in a different way. None of us have lived the year we imagined for ourselves last Rosh Hashanah. Certainly, all of us had moments in the year when we did not live fully by our values or treat others with kindness, and for those moments, we should work to repent and seek forgiveness as we would in any other year. But the bulk of the reasons that we didn't live the year we imagined were reasons beyond our individual control. And thus it will not be productive to judge ourselves harshly for not living the year we intended.

So what we do? How might we approach these ten days that we begin tonight? I invite us all to first give ourselves permission to feel however we are going to feel; to resist judging ourselves for feeling too much or too little, or for feeling an emotion different than the one we expect or assume to be appropriate.

Living through this pandemic has often required us to push down our emotions so that we can keep going. But there is only so long that we can keep it all in, and what are these ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur for, if not for looking inward, for being honest with ourselves and for allowing ourselves to feel? It is okay to wallow in our emotions for a time, as long as we lift ourselves back up at the end.

Judaism provides us with a model, who just happens to be my favorite Biblical character and the protagonist of the traditional Rosh Hashanah Haftarah portion.² Channah, the future mother of the prophet Samuel, has come to the Temple on pilgrimage with her family. She is deeply unhappy. Though she is loved by her husband, Channah longs to be a mother and is tormented by the sight of her husband's second wife and her many children. In her misery, Channah walks to the Temple alone and offers a spontaneous prayer.

The Bible describes Channah as *marat nafesh* – bitter or sad in her soul. Storyteller Joel Grishaver highlights the connection between *marah* – bitter, and *maror* – horseradish. In order to understand Channah's emotional state, he urges us to imagine that moment when we have eaten too much horseradish and the heat rises up our bodies. For Channah, her prayer wells up from within in that same way, propelled by the depth of her emotion. The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash hold up Channah as a model of prayer, even deriving laws from this passage. For us, it might simply serve as inspiration to allow ourselves to be honest and vulnerable in moments of prayer. If you are hearing my words this evening it means you have gifted yourself this time for prayer and personal reflection in the shelter of our sacred community. Allow yourself to sink into the words, the melodies and the silence.

Once we have allowed ourselves space to feel, we can turn to the task of *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking an accounting of our life. And truly, our tradition always intends for this accounting to be about our moral lives – our behaviors and attitudes, rather than our successes and achievements. It is sometimes hard to separate these categories, but this year more than ever, we need to be intentional, so that we judge ourselves for only those things over which we had control and free will. Rather than weighing our successes and failures, we might weigh how we faced each challenge, how we chose to be in those moments.

² 1 Samuel 1:10-13

In the prayer Unataneh Tokef, which we will recite tomorrow morning, we are faced with the harsh reality of the universe: “Who shall live, and who shall die?” The bluntness of these lines leave them stuck in our minds, but it is the end of the prayer which conveys the most important message for us today: “*uteshuvah, utefilah, utzedakah, ma’avirin et ro’a hagezara* / But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of life.” This text is reminding us that while we may not have control over everything that happens in the world, we have control over how we choose to face it.

This message of Unataneh Tokef suggests a way for us to take an accounting of this past year. As individuals, we could not eliminate the pandemic, but we were able to choose the steps we took to protect ourselves and others, the attitude with which we carried ourselves and the tone with which we addressed those alongside us. Rather than focusing on what we didn’t do we can ask ourselves: Given the challenges I faced, how did I conduct myself? When times were tough, was I a help or a hindrance? When others were down, did I offer a hand? When I was down, did I accept help with grace and gratitude? The final lines of Unataneh Tokef do not promise that repentance, prayer and righteous giving will magically spare us from our circumstances, but they remind us that we choose, each and every day, how to respond.

As we sift through the memories of the past year, and reflect on our choices, we can also lift up the lessons we learned along the way, in order to carry them through to the future. While we may feel a bit tattered and worn down by the pandemic, each of us has grown as a person. We have learned new skills and uncovered new levels of fortitude and strength.

Rabbi Irwin Kula in his book, *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*, comments, “When we enter into the grit of life, the stuff we may resist or want to make go away, it’s amazing the gold we discover.”³ We might like to picture a heavy vault door swinging closed on the end of the pandemic, but before that door closes, we need to take with us the lessons we have learned, the relationships we have strengthened and the truths we have uncovered about ourselves.

Lifting up these lessons in no way brushes aside the tragedies of the pandemic. Neither does it assert that bad things happen in order that we can learn from them. What we are doing is accepting the circumstances we cannot control and wringing out from them every drop of wisdom and potential growth. As Rabbi Kula wrote, from the “grit of life” we can discover “gold.”

During the course of the High Holy Days, we are meant to balance time reflecting on the year that has passed and looking ahead to the year that has just begun. While a year ago we thought that this Rosh Hashanah we would be able to just reflect on the pandemic that had passed, it still looms ahead of us as well. So how can we frame our hopes and wishes for the coming year knowing how much uncertainty we still face? How might we best position ourselves to live a year we can look back on with satisfaction and pride next Rosh Hashanah?

First, we must shed any remaining notion that we know what lies ahead. The words of Unataneh Tokef, “who shall live and who shall die,” have reminded us of this for centuries, but somehow we still hold on to the illusion that we know how our lives will play out. And this past year has taught us, perhaps with more emphasis than necessary, that life is unpredictable.

³ Irwin Kula, *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*.

Mathematician John Allen Paulos said, “Uncertainty is the only certainty there is, and knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.”⁴

Our security, following Paulos’ logic, are the tools that we use to make decisions and the resolve that we will make decisions one at a time as new situations present themselves. We make each decision carefully, recognizing that we are making the best decision we can with what we know in that moment. In a sense, on Yom Kippur, through the words of Kol Nidre, we capture this idea in a sacred pledge to do our best. Kol Nidre preemptively acknowledges that in the coming year we will promise things with all sincerity that will not come to fruition, and then it asks for God’s forgiveness. Rabbi David Stern refers to its words as “the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do.”⁵ Forgiveness for what we cannot achieve through honest effort is built right in to the High Holy Day liturgy, we just need to remember and believe that for ourselves when we feel disappointment down the road. According to Rabbi Kula, “In the end we must act on faith, not that it will all work out as we want but that our best guess is good enough, that it will somehow lead us to a place of discovery, of new perspective, of a wider self.”

Over the next ten days, may we give ourselves space to be like Channah, to let our souls speak their truths. May we treat ourselves with the same gentleness we ask of God – reflecting on how we responded to the life we lived rather than judging ourselves for not living the life we had imagined. May we lift up the ways we have grown – celebrate lessons learned through adversity. And may we enter the New Year resolved to bring our best selves to each day, whatever it may bring. Kein Yehi Ratzon, May this be God’s will.

⁴⁴⁴ John Allen Paulos, *A Mathematician Plays the Stock Market*.

⁵ *Mishkan HaNefesh*, CCAR Press.