

Rosh Hashanah Reflections



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Introduction

Rosh Hashanah is traditionally a time for reflection, for *cheshbon hanefesh*, a process of self-examination and taking stock.

In these pages, nine Reform rabbis reflect on what Rosh Hashanah means to them as well as offering inspiration for the coming year. How might we change? What might we change?

We hope these reflections will enrich your experience of Rosh Hashanah.

Shanah tovah u'metukah - wishing you a good and sweet new year.



Rabbi Howard Cooper

Where Is 'Home'?

When, at the climax of King Lear, the homeless and demented king finds himself wandering in the wilderness, an outcast braving the hardships of a raging storm, he stumbles upon a wretched figure, and Lear addresses him, 'poor Tom', in a moment of extraordinary empathy and self-recognition: "Is man no more than this? Consider him well...Thou art the thing itself...unaccommodated man is no more than a poor, bare, forked animal, such as thou art" (Act 3, scene 4).

These wonderful, fearful, words haunt my 'Days of Awe'. The self-recognition is humbling: 'unaccommodated, poor bare forked' creatures such as we all are.

Not that I am literally 'unaccommodated'. We, the fortunate ones, sit securely with roofs over our heads. We are not squatting on the borders of Syria where three million people have now left their homes as refugees; no, we aren't one of the 45 million forcibly displaced people around the world. We are - fortunately, blessedly - 'accommodated' in that plain sense.

But still, at this season, maybe we glimpse ways in which we might, at a deeper level, be 'unaccommodated'? For what does it really mean to feel 'at home' in the world? Relaxed, casually, gracefully, 'at home' in this fractious, tempestuous, unredeemed world? As a New Year begins and we are called to account for ourselves, do we not glimpse the fragility of it all?

Stockmarkets crash, or illness strikes, or death claims someone close to us and we shudder at the randomness of it all - the ways, so many ways, in which our lives are not in our own hands. If Lear can be reduced to homeless nothingness, it can happen to any of us.

The tides of history may have been kind to us – but in our hearts we know they are tides. One moment you can be secure, accommodated in the world, and the next day your world can be turned upside down. This is the ageless human story, and it is certainly the Jewish story.

So where are we 'at home'? In our families? In our work? In our local community? In our synagogue community? In our Judaism? All these have the capacity to make us feel at home and the potential to make us feel unsettled or alienated. None of them have the quality of 'at homeness' as a given. All can let us down, just as the material world can let us down.

But maybe looking outside ourselves to feel at home is looking in the wrong place. Maybe we should be asking: do we feel 'at home' in ourselves? Can we rest inside ourselves? How often do we feel distracted, on edge, ill-at-ease – we know so well how fragile things are inside us. Not just our body's state, but our emotional state, and our psychological state. We know how prone we are to swings of mood, pettiness, irritation, anger, jealousy, possessiveness, envy... Are we ever really 'at home' with ourselves and in ourselves?

At this season we ask these questions – or rather the liturgy of our tradition asks us these questions, sometimes in language we embrace and sometimes in language we flinch from. How often it reminds us in almost exactly Shakespeare's words: "Is man no more than this? Consider him well" – and then offers us a list: 'a cup so easily broken... like grass that withers, like flowers that fade, like passing shadows and dissolving clouds, a fleeting breeze and dust that scatters, like a dream that fades away.' And we do approach these days as 'poor, bare' creatures – "empty of good deeds" we say in the liturgy - for the dominant motifs of the *machzor* are of our impoverishment, our inadequacy, our incapacities in the things that matter.

Of course this is only half the story of what it is to be human, because we are also capable of the most extraordinary good deeds. We all have the potential for compassion and love and dedication and a sense of justice and altruism and sacrifice. This is also part of the human story, the Jewish story, and it is important that we hold on to the knowledge of these parts of ourselves as well at this season - even though the emphasis in the High Holy Days is on the other sides of our nature: our failures and wrongdoing and perversions of what we know to be right. We are innately two-sided, pulled between opposites.

This is what I think Shakespeare is alluding to when he describes us as 'unaccommodated, poor, bare, forked' creatures. Maybe this is my own imaginative reading, or creative mis-reading, of 'forked', but I hear in that expression the reflection of what in rabbinic Judaism is seen as the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hara*: our so-called 'good inclination' and 'bad inclination'. Judaism acknowledges that we are 'forked' creatures, we human animals, pulled between our creative and destructive capacities.

Shakespeare's text inspires me to look again at our liturgy and see how often his marvellous, humbling description - 'unaccommodated, poor, bare, forked' creatures such as we all are – is reflected there. And not least in the image of God as our home, our only true home: "Return to Me, and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7). The prophet intuits God's promise that the Holy One of Israel is our ultimate home - origin and home - an energy that animates all of being, including ourselves, a presence that accommodates us, that has room for us, that wants us nestled, housed, within its embrace, the wings of the *Shechinah*. This is the spiritual vision of 'home' that our Days of Awe offers us.

Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz

Did Abraham fail the test?

One of the most riveting and disturbing Rosh Hashanah moments is when *Akeidat Yitzchak*—the Binding of Isaac, is read in synagogue. Many of us will feel troubled by it and are tempted to conclude that Abraham failed the test. Not because he didn't sacrifice Isaac but because he almost *did*. How can we argue this?

Previously in the book of Genesis, we witnessed the unfolding of the Sodom and Gomorrah story. The Sodomites twisted their laws to legally oppress the stranger and the poor. Finally God heard a great outcry rising from Sodom. God decides to intervene and overturn the cities. Of course this begs the question: were all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah morally corrupt and deserving of death?

Abraham asks himself the same question and he calls God on it, so to speak. "Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do justly?" (18:25). The Abraham we encounter here is a man who walks with God. He has the courage to hold God to God's own absolute moral standards. Would God not expect Abraham to rise to the occasion?

As the famous Bible scholar Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg writes in her monumental work, 'Genesis – the Beginning of Desire': 'In [this] famous passage, Abraham negotiates with God about the destiny of Sodom. "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" asks God (18:17). In [Midrash] *Bereshit Rabbah*, God's special love for Abraham is expressed thus: I shall do nothing without his knowledge"... his consciousness (*da'at*) is valued by God, his reactions courted even where they run, in an obvious sense, counter to the expressed intent of God.'

It is Abraham's ability to 'hold both God and man in a single thought', which, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel is the mark of a truly religious human being. This is the context preceding *Akeidat Yitzchak*. Our troubling passage opens with '*achar hadevarim haeleh*'-'and it was after these things'. The classical commentators ask themselves, 'what things?' Perhaps this refers to the Sodom episode.

Then Abraham surprises us with his most troubling act yet. When the Torah tells us, 'and it was after these things that God tested Abraham' we know all too well what follows: the reprehensible commandment to sacrifice his son.

Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg suggests that Abraham stayed silent upon hearing the gruesome order. She says: ‘Silence is the ultimate modality of Abraham... Abraham was silent when suffering, as it is said, ‘Take your son.’ He could have said, ‘Yesterday, You told me, “in Isaac your seed will be named”.’ He could have [should have?] responded... “but he says nothing”.

This man timidly and willingly resigns himself to the fate of sacrificing his beloved son.

We can, however, read the text in a radically different way. When the Torah states that ‘God tried Abraham’, the true test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice Isaac but rather whether Abraham would have the holy chutzpah to do again what he did before. Resist. Defy. Argue.

Can you hear the dark irony of the Torah’s text as God issues His command? Is God issuing Abraham a hidden command to rebel? Is, a God who demands such an exacting price a God worth serving? Rashi hints at God’s real intent through the word ‘*v’ha’elehu*’—bring him up. God doesn’t use the word ‘slaughter’ at all...

And yet, Abraham takes his son up to Mount Moriah. Silence marks their ascent to the sacrificial altar, a descent into slavish obedience. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav considers this an encounter with the *challal panui*, the silent space of God’s absence. Perhaps God makes Himself absent from abhorrent human actions done in His Name. Perhaps the silence awaits Abraham’s response.

We can all imagine moments in our lives as Jews, as people of faith, as human beings where we should have stood up to authority. It is easy and comfortable to conform, to wash our hands clean from responsibility. But both the Sodom story and the *Akeidah* remind us that it is often through rule of law that the cruellest of crimes are perpetrated.

It is this type of cruel, zealous religion that angers us. There is a definite place in our tradition for what I would call ‘covenantal anger’ sparked by the human condition. Rule of divine law means that God, too, is bound by justice.

Both modalities of Abraham live within us. Hopefully, reminding ourselves of the *Akeidah* and standing before the Divine Presence during these Days of Awe will give us the strength to emulate the Abraham we love and admire.

Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner

We're middle of the road folk and we're certainly not angels

On Rosh Hashanah when we review our past year - it might be a relief to hear what our medieval French scholar, Rashi, says about who we are. He claims that we are "in between people" - *beinonim* - neither absolutely righteous nor absolutely wicked but just run of the mill people. Hopefully you recognize yourself as this, rather than absolutely righteous or absolutely wicked! For me, it's a relief not to think of myself as at neither extreme. Most of us do not live either completely ethically and selflessly, nor living completely at odds to these aspirations.

Rashi explains that to be *benoni*, in the middle, means to have done roughly half good and half bad over the past year. The constant drive to improve our behaviour is sharpened at this time of year - we can influence our future through *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*. *Teshuvah* describes the "return" and rediscovery of ourselves as essentially good people. *Tefillah* is prayer and *tzedakah* righteousness and justice - correct and proscribed.

It's not our way to expunge our mistakes or our misdemeanours through spiritual or physical self-flagellation. Instead, we are expected to be proactive and repent through acts of goodness and *tzedakah*. I love the weight of this expectation. It is a beautiful and profoundly Jewish message that to secure our names in the Book of Life, we must qualify prayer and contemplation with action, seeking forgiveness from those we have wronged and engaging in *tzedakah*. This ability to act, to live life consciously and purposefully, is ultimately what makes us human. During these Days of Awe, we face up to having misused or actually abused this ability. We contemplate whether we have used our power to act responsibly and positively, enriching the lives of our family, community and society.

Facing our own humanity is the core task of our High Holydays - even when we perhaps want to turn the other way.

For two years now, the rhythm of my year has been punctuated by daily study

of the Talmud - one folio, two sides of Talmud every day as part of the Daf Yomi international Talmud cycle that takes seven and a half years to complete. The *daf* or folio of Talmud whose reading coincides with Erev Rosh Hashanah, deals specifically with what makes us human. *Chagigah 16* explains that in three ways, we are like animals, and in three ways, we are like angels. Like animals, we eat and drink, have offspring and die. These three actions related to the life cycle, its sustenance, its reproduction and its conclusion. They constitute the instinctual drives of what Jewish tradition calls '*nefesh*', the life force of living beings. Like angels, meanwhile, we are wise, we are upright and we speak Hebrew. This relates more to *neshamah*, the spiritual component of our souls, the divine spark that ultimately separates humans from animals, the part of us that is sensitive to God's will in the world.

If we acted solely upon *nefesh*, we would live passive and meaningless existences, lives without impact. If humans acted according to *neshamah*, our lives might be decisively thoughtful and spiritual, but lacking in action and disconnected from the world. Our task as Jews is to be *beinonim* of another sort, to occupy the intermediate ground between animals and angels, between the everyday business of being and the divine business of prayer and thoughtfulness.

Exploiting this middle space between animalistic 'being' and angelic 'thinking' leads to action. As Reform Jews, this challenge should never not pass us by. Do we improve the lives of those people around us? Do we work for ourselves alone or for the good of our families and communities too? Are we using the definitively human ability to act in a responsible and impactful way?

During the Days of Awe, we couple thoughtfulness with action through *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*, struggling against our mistakes towards redemption and inscription in the Book of Life. As Jews, *beinonim* existing between extremes of any kind - good and bad, between animal and angel, our divine task is to negotiate our position between these extremes not only now on Yom Kippur, but always. Let the blast of *shofar* be a clarion call to another year of thought, of action and of joy.

Ken yehi ratzon, may it be God's will.

Ken yehi ratzoneinu, may it also be our will.

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain

The Rosh Hashanah alarm clock

Something you may have come across is that list 50 Things to Do Before You Die which sets out all sorts of activities many of us have never done, and may never do, but enjoy speculating about how we might if we really wanted to: such as doing a parachute jump, having a bath filled with champagne, flying to New York and back just to have a great pizza. While you may not be enamoured by these particular suggestions, the book resonated with many because we know we often fail to take opportunities we should seize.

Those 'if onlys' could also be to do with much deeper issues, such as with our job and changing direction. Or it might be to do with our relationships, rescuing those that have gone pear-shaped, or reviving those that we have allowed to fade.

None of this is new. Long ago, the Book of Deuteronomy urged us to strive for improvement, saying: 'It is not too difficult for you or too far away: it is not in the heavens that you should say, who will go and fetch for us? ... nor is it across seas that you will say, who will cross the waters to find it for us?...but it is very near to you and within your grasp'. (30.11ff)

On a similar theme, one of the most powerful passages in the rabbinic commentary on the Bible, the Talmud, is: 'When your time comes and you go to Heaven, at the gate of entry you will not be asked "were you another Moses, were you another Einstein?" but: "Were you the best possible version of yourself. Did you use your potential to the full. Did you do what no one else but you could do?"'

So what about '50 Jewish Things To Do Between These High Holy Days And The Next'? Or, if you reckon that is too difficult, let's settle for 10 - but so long as you don't cheat...not because you would be selling me short, but selling yourself short...because I genuinely believe that, having done those extra 10, you would feel better for it, a better person, a better Jew.

As for what those 10 might entail:

1. Participating in the synagogue's *tashlich* (going to the river) on Rosh Hashanah, and if there is not one organised, then be the organiser.
2. When Yom Kippur is over, don't let go Jewish; build a *sukkah*, however amateur and wobbly, and if you do not have a garden, then help with the synagogue one.

3. Hold a latke party at Chanukah for family and friends, and anyone in the community who lives nearby.
4. Make time for Jewish learning: by coming to the adult education classes, Torah breakfasts, book circle, or developing your own programme of reading Jewish books.
5. But do not neglect home life: 55 seconds can transform Friday evening from yet another night to a Jewish night by lighting candles and saying the blessings over challah and wine.
6. If you are more of a watcher than a reader, there are plenty of Jewish films on DVD – from Schindlers List to Yentl.
7. Remember to take your Judaism with you whenever you leave home be it in the UK or abroad. Find the local synagogue, see, meet and greet local Jews; compare your and their Jewish life.
8. Be altruistic, too, and adopt a Jewish charity for this year – donate, fund-raise, publicise, help organise.
9. Adopt a fellow Jew in the community who is elderly or house-bound whom you can give lifts to the synagogue or local shops or take out to the cinema or visit at home. Do odd jobs around the house or help with paperwork, cook them a meal or do their garden.
10. Encourage the synagogue to tackle an area it has so far neglected: be it lunches for the homeless, or a poetry circle, or a meals delivery service for elderly members, or twinning with a Jewish community abroad, or Jewish spirituality group, or play-reading circle or whatever other activity is missing. And if you are already doing some of those already, then choose other goals instead.

The High Holy Days are essentially an alarm-clock: “wake up – time is passing – opportunities are whizzing by ; we need to make the most of them, not watch them disappear”.

Doing it not just because rabbis say so, but because we will feel more at home in our Jewishness, more rooted in our tradition, more connected to the rest of the community... and happier personally.

Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild

What inspires you, how you will change and what you will change in the coming year?

Rabbi Morris Joseph is by way of a hero of mine. A man who had journeyed in his life from service as rabbi of orthodox communities, to the West London Synagogue, his published writings belie the fact that he was essentially a man of the 19th century and have much to say to us in the 21st.

In his sermon on “Reform and Reformers” he challenges his listeners to think about why they are in a Reform community at all. Dealing with those who joined for the laxity of ‘Judaism lite’ or who enjoyed the aspect of revolt against established authority, he admits the difference between the ideal theology and its less than ideal practitioners. He says “If the religious tone of our congregation is unsatisfactory, it is simply because so large a number of our members do not realise the responsibilities which their membership imposes upon them. They either attach no meaning to Reform, or they attach a wrong meaning to it.”

He goes on to remind us that the relaxation of some laws is done to free us for the meaning behind the law: “...because we are less bound, ritually and ceremonially, than other Jews. We are more free in one sense ; shall we accept that freedom without giving something in return, or, worse still, make it a pretext for stealing a wider and far less desirable freedom ? Why has the yoke of the Ceremonial Law been lightened for us ? Surely in order to place us under the yoke of a higher law, to set our energies free for the truly religious life. If we do not believe this, then we degrade Reform to the level of mere convenience and selfishness. We make it a force acting not on the side of Religion, but against it.”

Morris Joseph believed in the progressive nature of Judaism. He thought that in order to live, Judaism had to adapt itself to the shifting ideas of successive ages. But that did not mean that he did not also believe in the eternal nature of the Jewish message, and he preached wonderful sermons

that set out a theology of high ideals and the importance of trying to live up to them.

Ultimately, his measure of a person was not their theology, but the way they lived their lives. The point of Reform Judaism was to free our energies not to focus on the finest ritual details but to become the best, most honourable person we could become. His hope was that all who joined his synagogue would do so under “a strong and solemn sense of ethical and religious responsibility”.

Growing up in the Bradford Synagogue, one of the earliest Reform Communities in the country after West London and Manchester, the influence of Morris Joseph could still be felt. His call not for ‘Judaism lite’ but for an ethical Judaism connected to its history and covenant with God still echoed within that beautiful building.

The Jewish world has altered unimaginably since his death in 1930, and the wartime influx of German Jews to Britain changed and energised Reform synagogues in this country. The establishment of the State of Israel has also impacted on what it means to be Jewish. Yet his words continue to inspire me – his belief in the goodness of humanity, in the striving to be a better person expressed as our religious obligation, in his love of prayer and liturgy and his writing of new prayers for his community.

So what will be my change in the coming year? After more than eleven years successfully pioneering a job sharing model with Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, her retirement means it is time for me also to move on. At the time of writing I do not know what this will mean, but I shall be accompanied as always by the words and the teaching of Morris Joseph who believed in religion, in humanity, in community, in the Jewish people and in the aspiration to goodness.

What about myself will I change? I will once again search my heart and mind in order to identify how I can work this year towards becoming my best self, even though I know that this endeavour will never be fully achieved – and I will neither give up nor despair because I know this. And I will aspire to his ideal of becoming one of “those who have helped to form anew the moral life of Israel and to vitalize it afresh as a world-wide force.”

Rabbi Sybil Sheridan

Thoughts for Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe)

Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel said: 'Never were there any more joyous festivals in Israel than the 15th of Av and the Day of Atonement, for on them the maidens of Jerusalem used to go out dressed in white garments - borrowed ones, in order not to cause shame to those who had none of their own. These clothes were also to be previously immersed, and thus the maidens went out and danced in the vineyards, saying: 'Young men, look and observe well whom you are about to choose ; regard not beauty alone, but rather look to a virtuous family, for "false is grace, and vain is beauty: a woman only that fears the Eternal shall indeed be praised" [Proverbs, 31: 30], and it is also said [31]: "Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in her gates." ' (Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8)

This passage presents a strange image. Yom Kippur is considered a 'joyous festival' and is linked with Tu b'Av - the 15th Av which is virtually unknown today, other than – on the basis of this passage - being the Jewish equivalent to Valentine's day. The girls in white leave the city and enter the vineyards where they dance in front of an array of young men and the hope in each girl's heart is that they will be 'picked' by one of the suitable swains for marriage in the coming months.

On the very same day, in the Temple, the High Priest is making confession on behalf of himself, the Priesthood and the whole community. The goats are brought in, the lot falls on the scapegoat and it is driven into the wilderness while the other goats, along with the bulls for sacrifice, are offered up on the altar. What are we to make of this - the most serious, the most solemn day of the year - and the girls are out.... speed dating?

For the Rabbis of old, the problem was not Yom Kippur but Tu b'Av – they saw no problem with such behaviour on the joyous Day of Atonement. For us, brought up on the grand solemnity of the day, it is hard to fathom.

There are many parallels, - large and small - in this passage, to Yom Kippur as we know it. The girls are dressed in white. We are familiar with the white of the Days of Awe - the white mantles of the Torah scrolls, the white *kittel* worn by the rabbi and others in the community. The clothes of the girls are borrowed, ensuring that all – rich or poor – have the chance of dressing up and going out, just as the kittel, which is also the shroud in which we will be buried, reminds us that all are equal in death. The clothes are immersed in the mikveh before being worn and long is the tradition of going for immersion before Yom Kippur, just as the High Priest, as he changes into his white garments for the sacrifices, must immerse and purify himself.

Yom Kippur is the white fast - as opposed to the ninth of Av which is the black fast. Tisha B'Av mourns death, and the destruction of the Temple. Yom Kippur is about purification and the hope of salvation. It is positive where Tisha B'Av is negative. It looks forward where the fast of Av looks back.

Then there are parallels in the words of the young women; 'Regard not beauty alone' they urge the men. Look on good family, look on our deeds - the fruit of our hands. Look below the surface appearance and examine what is deep within us. That is what God does to us in these Days of Judgement. Finally, the maidens' lives will be changed after their dance in the vineyard. Within the next year, they will be wives, and maybe even mothers. It will be a new and very different existence.

Yom Kippur each year offers us the same possibility of a new life. We forget - this is a message that is wholly positive. We will be forgiven. We can start again.

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions' my mother-in-law quotes at me every time my usually inept attempts to do the right thing go hopelessly awry. But Judaism says the opposite. The road to heaven is paved with good intentions and each year, we can begin again with our best aspirations... maybe this time we can bring them properly to fruition.

Rabbi Larry Tabick

Translated and improved

Our teacher, the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn (of blessed memory) used to tell the story of the Yiddish translation of '*Alle Verke fun Shakespeare*' (All the Works of Shakespeare). On the title page the subtitle read: *Farteicht un farbessert* (Translated and improved). What a chutzpah! to think that you can improve on Shakespeare! (I suspect that intention was merely that this translation was an improvement on previous ones – but the story may be apocryphal.) Nevertheless, this is what I intend to do: offer a translation, and an improvement on an original.

In this case, the original comes from the sermons of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1809), a disciple of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, and one of the best loved characters in Hasidic stories. He was also a considerable scholar, as his sermons in *Kedushat Levi* (The Holiness of Levi) indicate.

The parable is presented as an explanation of why we dress up to hear the blowing of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah:

We bring a parable and allegory of a king of flesh and blood who went to a great forest for sport and to have the pleasure of wild beasts and birds. Eventually, he came to a deep valley and could no longer find the direct straight royal road back to his home. He saw some peasants, and asked them the way, but they did not recognise the king nor did they know how to reply to him, because they had never known the great direct straight royal road.

Then he found a man of wisdom and understanding, and asked him the way. The wise man understood that the king was agitated, and immediately obeyed his wishes. He showed him the royal road, because as a result of his wisdom, he knew the direct straight royal road, and so led the king back to his royal palace, and restored him on his throne. The man found great favour in the king's sight, and was set above all the royal princes. He was dressed in precious garments, and his own garments he ordered to be put into his treasury. (Levi Isaac of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi* (Munkacs, 1829), p. 96a.).

The parable continues. The man sins against the king, provoking royal anger, but wins favour again when he puts on his old clothing. The king remembers how he saved him, and restores him to his position. According to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, God is the king (of course), the people of Israel are the man who helps him find his way, and the reason we dress up to hear the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is to remind God of how we accepted the Torah on Mount Sinai with great enthusiasm, and thereby earn divine forgiveness for our sins.

I liked the opening of the parable, the *mashal*, but felt that the Berditcher's *nimshal*, his exposition, is a bit lame. It fails to take full account of the notion of the man helping the king find his way back to his palace – via the king's own highway! Perhaps Levi Yitzchak did not appreciate the radical nature of his own parable, or was not prepared to be radical in his interpretation, but I am.

So here is my version of the *nimshal*:

Of course, the king is still God, and the man who helps him find his way is now the spiritually enlightened individual, the ideal Jew.

On a universal, cosmic scale, God is the All-Compassionate, giving existence to all that is and life to all that lives, but God's compassion is lost among the multiplicity of objects that neither recognise God nor are capable of leading God back to compassion. On a smaller scale there is much suffering and little compassion. A wise person recognises the Divine Presence in all things and practices Divine Compassion on the individual and communal level even when God (apparently) does not. Such a wise person guides the Divine Sovereign back to the palace. The wise person knows how to act on God's behalf.

The God who is present in all of us is often hidden under the weight of our mundane concerns, our fears and anxieties. These keep us from being the concerned and caring people that God wants us to be. If we can overcome them, we can lead the God within us back to the palace of divine compassion. Perhaps this is the message of Rosh Hashanah.

Is my interpretation an improvement? I leave you to decide.

Rabbi Charles Wallach

The Holiness Code

Whenever I think of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, my mind goes to Chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus, the Holiness Code. Though not actually one of the Torah readings traditionally selected to be read on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, it became one of the passages read in most Reform and Progressive communities around the world during the High Holy Days.

In the community in which I grew up it was read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. There it was always read in those years by the same man: *kedoshim tiheyu...* did he declaim - "You shall be holy, for I God am holy". The most well known words in the chapter are of course *vehavta lereacha kamocho* - love your neighbour as yourself, the golden rule, perhaps the heart and soul of not just the High Holydays but of life itself..

But, for me, what still resonates in my head are words that appear later in the chapter - *m'oznei tzedek, avnei tzedek... v'hin tzedek* - just weights and measures shall you have: Long did I ponder upon those words, words directed not just to those who heard them ages ago, but which were to be heard and acted upon from then onwards.

Years later I was to reflect upon them again when I heard the following: Somewhere in Eastern Europe during the

month of Elul in the build up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur a salt seller - a man who sold salt - would add a few grams of salt more to the order placed by his regular customers. Though scrupulous in maintaining his weights and measures he knew that however exact he might be, a few grains of salt inevitably would remain. By giving a little extra to his regular clients he was effectively saying sorry (*selicha*) for any inadvertent short changing done during the year.

Just before the lines previously quoted is found the phrase *mipne seva takum* : "You shall rise before the hoary head" is the normal translation. Whenever I read or hear those words I think of buses, not just any buses, but buses in the Netherlands and in Israel.

For in the Netherlands buses often carry the phrase *opstaan voor iemand misstaat niemand* - to stand up for someone hurts nobody. And in many a bus in Israel does one find the original just quoted above - the actual words from Torah which young and old would know or would certainly have learned along the way.

We often tend to think that repentance, and particularly repentance during and after the High Holydays, requires much effort and thought. *Sedra Kedoshim*, the Holiness Code, proves otherwise. As the theologian Rudolf Otto is quoted as I recall by Rabbi Albert Friedlander of blessed memory said it is God's little bible: Each year I read it and read it again...and try to live by it.

Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers

Making amends

In June a burglar wrote to a pub she helped burgle 22 years ago, including £100 as compensation for her previous misdemeanour and any damage caused. The landlady was rather surprised to receive her letter and was struggling to decide what to do with the money.

For the author of the letter, this felony had perhaps been playing on her mind, and she needed to clear her conscience. Or maybe she was undertaking the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 steps to recovery, of which step 9 is making amends. This process of making amends comes with a proviso however, that doing so shouldn't do more harm than good; sometimes re-visiting our past misdemeanours might cause more pain for those involved than to just gently let bygones be bygones.

More often than not, I suspect, when we return to the hurts we have caused others, it is because it has been troubling us. It may also have been playing on the mind of the offended party, but as in the case of our pub landlady, it's also possible that something we have been harbouring guilt for is in fact entirely forgotten by others. Having the courage to face our past can release us from the nagging voices of guilt, even if those voices have been bothering only us.

In Judaism, if we want to make amends for something we have done in the past, one of the crucial factors is that we change our behaviour. As Moses Maimonides outlines in his steps to *teshuvah* (return):

1. Realise that what you did was wrong and admit it
2. Say you are sorry for what you did
3. Correct the wrong that you did
4. Promise not to do the wrong thing again
5. Behave correctly in a similar situation when it occurs in the future.

So while an apology and some compensation are important steps to correcting the past, things are only accepted as changed by God if we don't

repeat the same mistakes again. Simple in the case of pub thefts perhaps, but less easy in the case of the daily remorse we might feel for the misuse of words, taking advantage of others, or misplaced anger.

An apology can be a tough thing to offer, acknowledging our own wrong and mistakes, but making sure we don't repeat the mistake is truly making amends making. So when I repent during these coming high holidays for the times I have put work before family, or when I have gossiped, or failed to fulfil a commitment, I will only truly receive forgiveness if, in the year that follows, I manage to refrain from these simple, frequent, but damaging errors.

Perhaps this is why we need the High Holy Days every year – and a half yearly check in at Pesach when the search for *chametz* (leavened foods) and burning it afterwards represent an opportunity to remember the things we want to change in our lives. Just as we may throw bread at the *tashlich* ceremony, when we burn the *chametz* we find we are trying to remind ourselves to burn those things out of our lives that are enslaving us and making us into people we do not wish to be in the world. We don't require the deep processes of *teshuvah* every week, but a few times a year we are given an opportunity to press the reset button.

This Rosh Hashanah will be an even greater opportunity to press reset, as it is the beginning of the next *Shmita* year – or year of release. Traditionally this recurring seventh year was a time when the land laid fallow, perennials and the food that did grow was open to all, and debts and slaves were released.

Shmita is framed in the Torah in the context of social justice, and so this coming year is a chance for us to press reset on many of our behaviours that might be enslaving others. We can regret and repent for our abuse – direct or indirect – of others, particularly through our consumption, but unless we change our behaviour, we will not have made amends and our *teshuvah* may well be considered to have failed.

So this Rosh Hashanah we can press the reset button on all sorts of areas and try to make the coming year one of refreshment and re-growth through changing our own behaviours, and seeing that change through.

Biographies of Contributors

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Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz was born in Amsterdam and grew up in the Netherlands and Spain. After training as a cultural anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam, she pursued Jewish studies at Paideia in Stockholm and rabbinic studies at the Ziegler School of Rabbinics in Los Angeles and Leo Baeck College in London. With an interest in issues of meaning and identity, she enjoys teaching about *mikveh*, conversion and the transformative power of *mitzvot* and contemporary Jewish spirituality. She also is passionate about leading musical services and writing songs. She is the Assistant Rabbi of Sinai Synagogue in Leeds.

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