

Erev Rosh Hashana Drash

I invite you for just a moment to close your eyes. See if you can conjure up memories of previous Rosh Hashana holidays.

Now, if you're old enough, I want you to shift to the secular calendar and picture where you were 25 years ago today.

You can open your eyes.

My guess is, most of you here remember. According to PEW research data, 93% of Americans over 35, remember exactly where they were 25 years ago today. It was a day that turned our world upside down, and for a brief window in time it felt like the whole world came together to stand with us in our shock and grief. Of course we wouldn't wish for anything like that to happen again, and we know that that grief isn't abstract at all for the thousands of people who lost friends and loved ones, but it can still be instructive. September 11th was one of those moments in life that brings laser focus to what really matters, while everything else takes a back seat. It can cause our perspective on life to change rapidly and our priorities to change dramatically. Such moments aren't exclusively related to horrific events. The birth of a baby or getting really good news can also trigger that kind of clarity, but often it is something related to life or death.

Losing my own father a year and a half ago was one of these moments with hyper-awareness of the realm beyond our daily lives. My family describes that last week of hospice together as a time when the veil was very thin, as we sat, snuggled, and sang together, helping my father transition from this realm. That experience however was limited mostly to my family. Other people went about their regular lives, while we were transfixed by the moment we were in. On the other hand, September 11th, while it certainly had a profound impact on countless individuals, was also a collective, country-wide, if not world-wide, experience of pausing and reflecting.

Judaism offers intentional opportunities for this, where we pause to consider the realities of life and death in an almost role-playing approach. While memories of one Rosh Hashanah to the next are likely to run together in our brains, and the talk of who shall live and who shall die remains theoretical, it is still a collective opportunity to stop for a couple days and think about what we are doing with our lives, all the more powerful when done communally.

Rosh Hashana is one of the four new years of the Jewish calendar together with the new year of trees in the winter, the political new year (marked by Pesach), and the new year of animal tithes in the summer. The four different new years reinforce the cyclical nature of time. There is no beginning or end to a circle, especially one with four separate marked entry points. Like breathing, where neither the in-breathe nor the out breath is the stopping or starting mark. We can return to Source and reorient ourselves anytime, especially through daily and weekly practice, but there's something powerful about coming together annually to do so with great intention. Indeed, it may be no coincidence that Rosh Hashana is the 7th month of the year of political year of the ancient Israelites. Sages have pointed out that as the seventh month, it is the equivalent of the shabbat of the months. Just as the seventh day and the seventh year are times of rest, so is the seventh month like a shabbat or sabbatical for the Jewish people. A time to pause our business as a *kahal* and remember our purpose.

Setting aside time for this is important for many reasons, but for one, it's not sustainable any other way. Just like our lives eventually fell back into new-normal routines after September 11th, and just like eventually I had to come out of *shiva* and *shloshim* and live in a world where that veil was not so thin all the time after my dad's passing, we can't exist permanently in that suspended mode, hyper-aware of the preciousness of life and the presence of the Divine. We can't tolerate that level of intensity all the time. Having experienced it however, we can try to bring forward some of the lessons.

In the lead up to the 25th anniversary of 9/11, there have of course been plenty of articles remembering the event and one article a few days ago in the Washington Post was about what some psychologists are calling “post-traumatic growth.” Rather than the common and very real experience of post-traumatic stress, or PTSD, some researchers are exploring how traumatic experiences can also result in positive change. Certainly *no one is saying*, “oh yeah trauma is good for people!” but the negative stress that results is *not* the *only* possible outcome. The psychologists quoted in the article explain that after focusing on the “disorder” impacts of trauma for a long time, they are beginning to look at the other effects. They explain that “traumatic events can shatter core beliefs, including that the world is safe. The process of reconstructing a system of beliefs can be painful....But when something bad happens, believing that you’ve learned from it gives you more control over the event, so you don’t feel like a passive victim of the cosmos.”

Isn’t this what we are simulating on Rosh Hashana when we ask, “who will live and who will die” and how can we soften the decree? By teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedaka? The article about the 9/11 survivors talked about how they radically altered their lives after the tragedy. One survivor explained, “I’m a kinder person than I was before. It made me more compassionate.” Many described turning from high pressure jobs in finance to other areas of work in helping careers. No one is saying that working in finance is wrong. For the record, I am friends with a lovely, warm, and generous family that is part of that world in NYC, but my point is that the tragedy of September 11th was the impetus for positive personal and spiritual growth for some people. And Rosh Hashana presents similar opportunities for reflection without the actual trauma (unless of course you equate sitting in shul to trauma, which some of my own children might argue is how they feel, but that’s another topic).

So if teshuva, tefillah, and tzedaka are the keys for unlocking this personal and spiritual growth, I thought it would be good to make sure we can identify them. Tzedaka and tefillah are understandable enough, but teshuvah is perhaps more complicated, so I spent some time studying what Maimonides wrote about it in the Mishnei Torah.

However, I suspect that before we can appreciate what Maimonides had to say, we need to unpack the language a bit as it is heavy with misinterpretation and baggage. In the context of Rosh Hashana, teshuvah is commonly translated as “repentance.” Similarly, the term bal-teshuva means “penitent,” and here’s where many of us start tuning out, uninterested in a conversation that seems laden with shame and guilt. I think a lot of us associate “repentance” with someone wearing a sandwich board and yelling at strangers on a city street about the end being near. It’s associated with the idea of sinning and damnation. Doesn’t feel very Jewish at all. (Although read the prophets and you might think again.) Yet, teshuvah is the defining theme of the High Holy Days, so perhaps we need to make some peace with our understanding of what it is. Hebrew has to do a lot of heavy lifting, with one word potentially meaning several different words in English and teshuvah is an example of this. Teshuvah comes from *lashuv* meaning “to return or to do again.” *Shuv*, means “again.” *Teshuv* is simply the future tense 2nd person as in “you will return” and throw a *hey* on the end and *teshuvah* is more commonly used to mean “answer, reply, solution” or “something returned” as it is to mean “repentance.”

And what about bal-teshuvah? Most people in this room probably bristle at the thought of being a baal-teshuvah. How is that? It’s because the term bal-teshuva has come to be associated specifically with someone who has joined or re-joined the Orthodox world. So let’s start from a different place. Baal can mean master, expert, owner or husband (think of husband here in the classic sense of husbanding or caring for something). What if we understand bal-teshuva as “expert at returning” or “master of answering” or “owner of the response” “or the one who takes care to answer”? Certainly these are more cumbersome than “penitent,” but I think they get us closer to the intention of the Hebrew.

Lastly there’s the matter of that ugly word, “sin.” We actually have several different words in Hebrew for that: *chet*, *avon*, *averah*, *asham*, and more, and each of them carry a wide range of definitions from crime to offense to missing the mark. Certainly crime feels like what we associate with the word sin, but don’t let that block you from understanding it as missing the mark. It’s easier to accept the term chet/sin if we understand it that way. When I’m tired and stressed, and I snap at my child for not walking the dog rather than responding in a more elevated way, that’s *chet*. Not quite achieving my intention. When I get pulled into an unnecessary conversation that falls more on the side of gossip or judgment than truly

helpful sharing, that's *chet*, not living up to my highest self. When I avoid making a donation to a worthy cause because I'm feeling financially strained, but I still grab an impulse purchase at Costco, that's *chet*, a misalignment that might need adjustment. It feels very different to acknowledge our struggles that way than to call them "sins."

With these updated definitions of teshuvah, bal-teshuva, and "sin," Maimonides's thoughts on the matter might penetrate us more deeply. For example, an English translation of Maimonides says that, "Since we all have free choice, a person should always strive to repent and confess his sins, in order to die a penitent. He should always imagine himself as potentially about to die, so that he is inclined to repent immediately and not wait until it is too late." Oof. Let's try that again with some alternative but equally legitimate language. We could understand him to say, "We never know how long this life will last, but our free will allows us to return again and again to Divine Source so that we might become experts at answering the Still Small Voice." If we approach Maimonides this way, it opens up several doors to the rest of his chapter on teshuva.

Maimonides says that "Teshuva is great, because it brings a person close to Shechina" (also known as the "in-dwelling or the feeling of the presence of God"). Maimonides writes about this as if it's an outcome of teshuva, but I think perhaps it can be both the outcome and the definition at the same time. Teshuva IS the act of re-alignment with Hashem. That's why when you are a bal-teshuva you feel close with Hashem.

Maimonides goes on to explain that it's not empty words or deeds that make teshuvah possible. It's all about the kavanah, or the intention. Another way of translating kavannah is direction. which is naturally related to return. You can't return somewhere without changing direction. Maimonides says that when you are aligned with the right kavanah, you will automatically be more engaged with mitzvot. You can think of it as a feedback loop. Drawing close to Divine Source allows you to better set your intentions which allows you to achieve more mitzvot or to be your best self. Just like our yearly cycle, there is no clear beginning and end to this process.

But without a beginning or end, how do we get started, or at least how do we become more intentional? We do so with soul-accounting, what we call, *cheshbon hanefesh*. Maimonides is clear that it's not just about the BIG *averot*, but more importantly, it's about the our *dayot rayot*, or our inferior traits, the not so "*yasher koach*" parts of ourselves. You'll notice when we recite *al chet* on Yom Kippur (or you can peek now if you're bored and need a little multitasking, they start on page 962), that most of the chetim aren't crimes. Yes there's a mention of bribery and violence, but the majority of them are things like a condescending glance, or foolish speech, or unwillingness to change.

Let's return for a moment to this idea of the awesomeness of the pivotal moments in our lives. And I'm using awesome in the traditional "*nora*" Hebrew sense here, not in a casual "Bill and Ted's" way. These days of awe, called *yamim norim* are an attempt to replicate on a yearly basis one of those rare life moments. A September 11th moment when life paused and people reevaluated what was important to them. I already mentioned that some of the most *yamim norim* days of my life were accompanying my father as far as I could through the transition from this life. In those days there was such a profound and peaceful clarity on what mattered and how sacred life is and who we need to be to and for each other. There was no room for our small selves, nor any need for them. We could feel the ultimate unity in our time together. We knew how to be love, and it flowed to and from and among us. As I said, we could sense that the veil was very thin between us and the Shechina in those moments. But we can't stay in those moments permanently. At least not as long as we're still in the Book of Life. The regular demands eventually come screaming back at us: bills, deadlines, parenting, appointments, dinner to cook, difficult people to deal with, etc. But having experienced moments like these we know that they are real, which brings us back to this holiday.

And what holiday is this exactly? Rosh Hashana is known by several names including, Hayom Harat Olam (the day the world was conceived), Yom haDin (the day of Judgement), and Yom haZikaron (the day of Remembrance). These names are not used in Torah so where do they come from? Hayom Harat Olam comes from the belief that it was this day the world was created. Yom haDin is because we recite Unetaneh Tokef, a reminder that our sense of control extends only so far and Yom Hazikaron appears to be a mash up of the two phrases "zichron terua" (remembrance of the blasting) and Yom Teruah (Day of blasting). What blasts are we

remembering? Some say we are remembering the sound of the shofar that got our attention at Mt. Sinai. It's said that we were all there, that every Jew that's ever lived was at Mt. Sinai. This is the non-linearness of Torah time. We just need to open our hearts to remember it. The *teruah* blasts are the nine staccato bursts sounding like an urgent alarm. They are said to resemble brokenness and deep sobbing. They recall for us our deepest moments of revelation, of being so broken open that the truth can penetrate our hard shells.

The truth about who we are meant to be and how we get there. The truth about the power of the deepest most authentic and vulnerable part of yourself being in conversation with the Divine or with the Source of all Unity or with the Still Small Voice or Hashem or Is-Was-Will-Be or whatever other moniker you want to use for YHVH.

The passages that we read from Torah and Tanakh across Rosh Hashana represent these kinds of pivotal life-altering moments. Imagine Sarah finding out that she's going to be a mother in her 90s. Or Hagar thinking she and her baby Ishmael are doomed to die in the desert, but then being comforted by an angel. And then there's Hannah, so despondent in her pain that her prayers seem like drunken babbling, then triumphant in the turnaround. These are all intense heart-stopping life-realigning moments. But perhaps the most *nora*-of all is the disturbing story of Abraham who was ready to commit filicide with his beloved son, but stopped just in time by an angel. Thankfully, Abraham hears the voice and answers (a form of "teshuvah"). Then he sees the ram and offers it instead, which is foundational to our being here today.

Midrash says that that ram had been waiting there for this moment since creation. The sages believe that the ram is one of the 10 miraculous things that Hashem created right after Adam, including Miriam's well, the mana we get in the desert, and Balam's talking donkey. They theorize that every part of the ram gets used to great purpose. In a great example of non-linear Biblical time, the ashes of the ram are used for the foundation of the internal altar of the temple, the sinews are used for David's harp, the hides for Elijah's garments, and the horns are blown at Sinai and will be blown again at the coronation of the messiah. So hearing the shofar is intended to connect us to Abraham's pivotal moment, the revelation at Sinai and *olam habah*, the world to come. It is intended to help us recognize the

potential for *this* moment to be pivotal, revelatory, and an opportunity to usher in a new reality.

So I invite us all during these *Yamim Noraim* (days of awe) to work towards becoming *ba'alei teshuvah*. To listen to the sound of the shofar, literally and metaphorically and set our intention to become “experts at turning around,” “masters at responding to the call.” Learning to bring our pure souls, in our vulnerability and our brokenness, without any fancy gold band-aids covering up the wounded parts, into conversation with the Still Small Voice. Like any kind of spiritual practice, this is not easy work. I am certainly not an expert myself, but I’ll keep working on it. As a framework for this conversation, on this birthday of the world, we can learn from the 18th century Hasidic rebbe Simcha Bunem, to hold two truths. It was said he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One quoted the Talmud saying, “for my sake the world was created” and the other was a quote from Abraham recalling that “I am but dust and ashes.” May we all have a sweet Rosh Hashana, a meaningful journey through the days of awe, and may we all be sealed in the book of life for a year of teshuva, growth, goodness, and peace.