



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE

Reflections and Table Activities
for Yamim Noraim

By Noam Zion

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A. Rosh HaShana: A Time of Critical Self-Reflection

Rabbi Marshall Meyer (activist for human rights in Argentina under the antisemitic, repressive government of the 1970's)¹

“Rosh HaShanah initiates the *Aseret Yimei Teshuvah* commonly translated as the ‘Ten Days of Repentance.’ I would like to suggest that for these days to have a new dimension of meaning we translate them as the ‘Ten Days of Searching, Twisting and Turning,’ of wrestling with our souls and trying desperately to find new meaning to our existence.”

Hannah Senesh's Diary- October 11, 1940

(young Hungarian kibbutznik who volunteered as a Jewish paratrooper and spy for the British Army and the Hagana to drop behind Nazi lines in Hungary, executed in Budapest, 1945)

“I want to make an accounting to myself, to God, that is I want to measure my life and my actions against the highest and purest ideal before which I can stand, to compare what I should have become with with what I have become...”

Aryeh Ben Gurion: A Kibbutz Educator's Bar Mitzvah Speech to his Grandson

When my grandson reached Bar Mitzvah age he asked me: “What kind of holiday is Rosh HasShana?”

I replied: “I will give you for this incoming year a diary with 365 pages and every morning you will try to write down all your hopes for that day and then before you go to sleep each night you will examine honestly and summarize how much of your expectations [of yourself] you realized. Know that whatever you wrote down in that book was the sum of your very own choices and decisions, the work of your own hands and the fingerprints you left on the world. No God and no superior force intervened to enforce its will on you [As Maimonides says, God gives us absolute free will in the realm of moral responsibility and only a fool believes that one's fate is sealed by luck or by the horoscope]. Your balance, your final accounting, is on the 365th page of your diary. That is Rosh HaShanah.

(Arye Ben-Gurion, *Yalkut – Yamim Noraim*, Kibbutz Movement)

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (19th century Poland) once made the oddest ruling:

When Rosh HaShanah coincided with Shabbat, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak issued God a decree.

¹ (ABC Radio Interview September 28, 1986)

“Sovereign of the Universe! Today is the New Year when you write the Jews either into the Book of Life or the Book of Death. However today is also Shabbat. So it is forbidden on Shabbat to write their verdict in the Book of Death. However you may inscribe them in the Book of Life since when life is endangered one may save it even while committing a violation of Shabbat. That is my ruling as the local rabbi of this community and you must abide by it.”

Reb Yisrael Salanter and the Shoemaker (19th century, head of Eastern European Mussar movement for increased ethical sensitivity among religious Jews)

Everyone was ready for the High Holy days and Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was on his way to the synagogue when he heard hammer blows. The sound came from a still-lit attic workshop where the town cobbler still toiled..

Reb Yisrael stole up to that attic and watched the shoemaker bent over his unfinished work. These were the townspeople’s shoes which they would need for the incoming winter.

“What are you doing here still working at this late hour before the holiday?”

The shoemaker raised his head and replied:

“As long as the candle is still burning there is still time to fix things [*Tikkun*].

So Reb Yisrael went out into the streets of the town and cried out: “Jews! As long as the candle [of your souls] still burns there is still time to fix the world [*Tikkun Olam*].”

Our Personal Year-at-a-Glance

Ask the people at the table to think for a minute about some of these questions and share an answer to at least one.

What was your greatest achievement/ disappointment?

What has “past” in your life and what is being “born” or “reborn”?

What event in other people’s lives brought you the greatest joy/ heartache?

Who did you most admire and why?

Name one mitzvah you are proud of having participated in.

Name one New Year’s resolution or commitment which you would like to make for the coming year?

What impossible dream would you pursue if you had enough money to take of for a year from your present occupation.

Rosh HaShanah:

Happy Birthday to the World

Rosh HaShanah is the Birthday of the Earth that God created in seven days. So too it is a time for human rebirth and renewal. Some people might wish to prepare a birthday cake for Creation and sing Happy Birthday and make birthday wishes.

The American poet E.E.Cummings composed a poem appropriate for the occasion:

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth day of life and of love and wings and
of the gay great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

The following midrash reminds us of our ecological responsibility for the gift of nature:

When the Holy One created Adam then God took him on a tour around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. Then God said:
“See all my works, how beautiful and good they are! All that I have created, I created for you. Beware that you do not corrupt or destroy my universe, for if you ruin it, there is no one to repair it after you.”
(Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

According to another midrash, today is more precisely the **Birthday of Humanity**, for the world was begun on the 25th of Elul and man and woman were created six days later on the 1st of Tishrei, the Hebrew date of Rosh HaShanah. That first day was packed with personal peaks and valleys.

The human being was created and in a period of twelve hours went through an entire spiritual journey: Created in the first hour of the sixth day, the human sinned in the 10th hour of the same day, was judged in the 11th hour, and pardoned in the 12th. God then assured humans that in the future when their descendants stand in judgment before the Holy One on Rosh HaShanah, they, like the first humans, will receive a full pardon.”

(Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 29:1 – double check original – based on Ron Aigen mMhsor 315)

If Rosh HaShanah is a birthday then at the table you might ask people: what birthday gift would you give the earth or give humanity on this day?

Trying a New Path

Halacha or Jewish law means literally the “a way of walking” and Rosh HaShanah is about checking your bearings and taking new paths where necessary.

The Hassidic Rebbe Haim of Tzanz told this parable:

A person had been wandering about in the forest for several days, unable to find a way out. Finally in the distance he saw another person approaching him and his heart filled with joy. He thought to himself: “Now surely I shall find a way out of the forest.”

When they neared each other, he asked the other person, “Brother, will you please tell me the way out of the forest?”

The other replied: “Brother, I also do not know the way out, for I too have been wandering about here for many days. But this much I can tell you. Do not go the way I have gone, for I know that is not the way. Now come, let us search for the way out together.”

(adapted from S.Y. Agnon, *The Days of Awe*)

Read this story and discuss your hopes for new direction in life. Think about a new path you would like to explore this coming year or let others know about an old path you have tried which they might best avoid.

In his diaries Franz Kafka, the 20th century Czech Jewish writer, reflects on the difficulty of finding our way and yet our eternal hope.

If we knew we were on the right road, having to leave it would mean endless despair. But we are on a road that only leads to a second one and then to a third one and so forth. And the real highway will not be sighted for a long, long time, perhaps never. So we drift in doubt. But also in an unbelievable, beautiful diversity. Thus the accomplishment of hopes remains an always unexpected miracle. But in compensation, the miracle remains forever possible.

The poet and Bible scholar Joel Rosenberg speaks of Rosh HaShanah as homecoming rather than as journeying:

The Hebrew word for year – *Shana* – means change. But its sense is two-fold: on the one hand, change of cycle, repetition (Hebrew, *l'shanot* reiterate, from *sh'naim*, two), but on the other hand, it means difference (as in the [the Pesach Seder when we ask] *mah nishtana?* How is this night different?) We are the same, we are different. We repeat, we learn, we recapitulate. We encounter something new. *Shana Tova!* means “Have a good change!”

And yet, how familiar is this time! The chant, the faces, the dressed-up mood, the Hebrew letter, the calling on the same God, the words, the blessings, the bread, the apples, the honey, the wine – all are the same, and yet completely new. We meet ourselves again and for the first time.

A year that begins anew is also the fruit of the year that preceded. Good or bad, it has made us wiser. It will not constrain us. We choose from it what we want and need like gifts we brought from journeys. Rosh HaShanah is always like *coming home* – just as Pesach was always *going on a journey*.

(unknown source)

How do we find our Divine Parent who is in Heaven?

How do we find our Parent who is in Heaven?

By good deeds and the study of Torah.

How does the Blessed Holy One find us – through love, through brotherhood, through respect, through companionship, through truth, through peace, through bending the knee, through humility, through more study, through less commerce, through the personal service to our teachers, through discussion among the students, through a good heart, through decency, through No that is really No, and through Yes that is really Yes.

(Midrash Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 23)

At a Time of Teshuvah We are All in Need of Good Editor by Chaya Gafni

Submission

Days of
inscription
of submission
before God
bent, back curved
as a comma,
or an end quotation
“” mark
having spoken
having scrawled the letters of our lives
on *claf* and cow hide

all have bent
over Ink black Nights
to meet these dead lines

to submit
rough draft in trembling claw
of a twelve month tale
of awetobiographic awe

Lapping up a page of whiteness
With a pen's thirsty tip
Sent to press
the Book of Life
encyclopaedic
voluminous

Each name a manuscript
of events
sins scribbled like a stowaway
writing wishes from the bowels
of a bottom-born ship

all of us in need of a good editor
to make structural emendations
spelling corrections, verb replacements

for a life lived
in stream of conscious
must be crafted by master's fingers,
gripping thumb

into something well worth reading
when at last the year is done

so, pray, let us write a masterpiece
let us be published
in the world

to come.

B. Seder Rosh HaShanah:

Symbolic Foods and New Year's Wishes

Preface: Honey, Hallah, Fruits and Vegetables, with Well-Wishing

Rosh HaShana's evening meal² may encompass an ancient custom of eating symbolic foods, a mini-Seder, if you will. The family tastes (or at least holds up for a New Year's wish) a variety of foods whose name, shape or color remind us of our greatest hopes for the New Year. This custom corresponds to the beginning of the year - a time of hope mixed with apprehension. The High Holidays – Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*) – are days of judgment – “who will live and will die? who will get rich and who will fall into poverty?” Yet they are also “good days” (*Yontof- Yom Tov*) for sumptuous celebration around the table, when we purchase for the whole family new dress clothes to wear on Rosh HaShanah.

Since the days of the Talmud the foods on the holiday table have been transformed into informal symbols of our New Year wishes. Best-known are the apples dipped in honey that symbolize a sweet year. Yet even the most ordinary vegetables, seasonal fruits and miscellaneous foods provide us an occasion to wish away our fears and verbalize our deepest hopes as well as a chance to pun on their names in any number of local tongues.

Honey is usually dipped with Hallah –often round shaped like a rising circular staircase (to recall how people ascend or descend the ladder of Divinely determined destiny). The circular breads also represent the circularity of time. There are other holiday motifs such as surrounding the Hallah with a wreath of flowers or other decorations to recall the crowning of the Divine King on Rosh HaShanah. After reciting the blessing over bread - *HaMotzi*, everyone wishes one another:

Y'hi ratzon milfaneacha she-t'cha-deish aleinu Shana Tova um'tuka!
May it be God's will that a good and sweet year be renewed for us.

The dipping of bread at each meal often continues from Rosh HaShanah all the way to the end of Sukkot. Jewish women from Poland and southern Russia used to place some

² Some families buy a special fruit or vegetable just now in season, one that has not been eaten for at least a year and bless it on the second night of Rosh haShana. This custom too may be combined with the Seder Rosh HaShana but it also has significance for Jewish law. For it is not clear on what basis we recite *She-chiyanu* – the blessing reserved for a new food or object or a beginning of a new holiday - even on the *second* night of Rosh HaShana. By adding a new fruit one has an uncontested reason for reciting *She-chiyanu* even on the second night.

honey in the four corners of their homes for luck. (Candy might serve the same role today).

The Rosh Hashana Seder Menu and the Tunisian “Honey Page”

The Rosh HaShana Seder finds its earliest written source in a peculiar menu whose symbolic significance is not revealed:

For a good omen on Rosh HaShana one should make it a habit to eat squash [like pumpkin], legumes [like string beans], *kartei*???, spinach and dates.” (Talmud TB Keritot 6a)

Tunisian Jews often “publish” a French and Arabic menu called the “**Honey Page**” for it lists all the special foods to be eaten and to be used to symbolize New Year’s wishes and of course it is headed by the word “*Devash* – honey.” Then the list often continues with figs, dates, pomegranates, apples, and the head of a ram or a fish. Other lands add carrots and beets, but obviously any food will do as long as you have a creatively corny sense of humor and a willingness to share your greatest fears and hopes.

Traditionally the **head** of a lamb or a carp is the occasion for a blessing (though vegetarians might perhaps substitute a head of cabbage or a head of lettuce)::

Y’hi ratzon she- ni-hi-yeh l’Rosh v’lo l’zanav
May it be God’s will that we will be a head and not a tail.

Spinach or beets, called in Hebrew *seleck* which can also mean “to remove decisively,” elicit the New Year’s wish:

Y’hi ratzon she- yis-talku soneinu.
May it be God’s will that our enemies be removed from our presence.

Pomegranates, filled with numerous sweet seeds, traditionally are associated with the 613 mitzvot so the blessing is :

Y’hi ratzon...??
May it be God’s will that our lives may be as full of mitzvot
as the pomegranate is with seeds.

Carrots or Squash which are called respectively, *Gezer* (decree) or *Kara* (tear up or read) are used for :

*Yehi ratzon milfanecha she-yikara roa gezar dinneinu, v’yikaru
lfaneacha zakiyoteinu*

May it be God’s will that the evil decrees against us be torn up and
our good merits be read out before You. .

For dipping **Hallah** we might use this hassidic wish:

“May God create yeast in your soul, causing you to ferment, and mature, to rise, elevate, to your highest possibilities, to reach your highest self”

The Power of the Pun: Inventing your own Seder Rosh HaShanah

Let us suggest some contemporary “green grocer” wishes punning in English on the shape, name or color of these fruits and vegetables:

Dates -

May it be God’s will that all my single friends have many dates this year.

Tomatoes or Hot Peppers -

May it be God’s will that this be a red-hot New Year.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg suggested:

Peaches – May we have a “peachy” year!

Brussels Sprouts– May our good fortune “sprout”!

(Irving Greenberg, High Holiday Guide (Clal,1977). Others bring leaf of **lettuce, rasins and celery.**

Let’s pray that our employers will raise our salary.

Song –Al Hadvash v'al HaOketyz –

By Naomi Shemer

This popular Israeli folksong uses the Rosh HaShanah symbol of honey to express the bittersweet nature of life. Originally written to comfort a friend who lost her husband in the war it is offered here to help us reflect on the uncertainty of our fate as the New Year begins.

Annual Tzedakah Allocations in a Family Meeting at the Table

While sitting at home as a family we can take advantage of the occasion to do a mitzvah collectively that is most appropriate for this season.

The beginning of the Jewish year (so different from the celebration of civil new year on January 1 in Times Square) is a time traditionally set aside not only for *Tefillah* (prayer and introspection) and *Teshuvah* (personal growth and change) but also for *Tzedakah* (giving what we owe to the needy). Thus a concrete way to begin the Ten Days of Teshuvah from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur is to convene a family meeting of the Tzedakah allocations committee around the holiday table. Incidentally discussing money on Shabbat or Yom Tov is fully permissible as long as the money is not for personal profit but for communal needs.

Ask family members for a list of potential Tzedakah recipients and for a pledge. Then vote on the distribution of the funds after each one makes their argument for their preferred priorities. You may wish to establish three categories and give an equal amount to each form of repairing and improving the world (*Tikkun Olam*):

- a. political and social reform activity
- b. basic human needs for needy of all backgrounds
- c. promoting Jewish culture and education (for without education the next generation will not continue the Jewish values on which social action, Tzedakah, are based)

C. *L'Shanah Tova* Cards – Wishing Others Well

Please Don't Say, “Happy New year, Rabbi”

Daniel Gordis, author of *A Jewish Parent's Reference Guide*, complains that as rabbi he always winced at his congregant's well-intentioned but misguided greeting – “Happy New year.” He recommends that parents explain to their children:

The Jewish phrase “*Shanna Tova*” means not a “happy” new year, but a “good” new year. Jews wish each other not just a year filled with happiness, but a year filled with goodness, in which we do good, bring good to the world, and try to become good people.... Send out your own Rosh HaShanna card with a greeting that reflects your sense of [a good year]. With desktop publishing and color printers these days, it is not hard. (p.222)

Rosh HaShana New Year's Cards³

Greetings cards became a holiday custom in nineteenth century Western Europe and Rosh HaShanah cards followed suit. However already in the 14th century Rabbi Jacob Molin known as the Maharil recommended his teacher's practice of adding the greeting *L'Shana Tova Tikateivu v'Teichateimu* to all correspondence sent during the month leading up to *Yamim Noraim* – the High Holidays. In 19th century Germany some cards took the form of a bank check written on the “Bank of Heaven” promising that “120 happy years will be granted by the Creator of the world with health, sustenance, blessing and success, wealth and honor.”

In England a Jew named Raphael Tuck started in 1866 a commercial business (“Art Publishers to Their Majesties the King and Queen”) to print Christmas cards. His son Adolph was made a baronet in 1910 in recognition of his production of these Christmas cards for the royal family. However he was also a loyal Jew, president of the Jewish Historical Society, and his company produced some of the first commercial Rosh HaShanah cards in the same period. During World War I, the Jewish Welfare Board sent V- Mail (Victory mail) Rosh HaShanah cards to Jewish personnel overseas. (see PICTURES). In Israel a series of holiday stamps is issued in this season and used annually for New Year's greeting cards.

The historic origin of the Jewish greeting – *L'Shana Tova Tikateivu v'Teichateimu* – “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year” – is the metaphor of the three books.

“Three books are opened [in heaven] on Rosh HaShanah – one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate people. [Already on Rosh HaShanah] the thoroughly righteous are inscribed in the Book of

³ Based on Philip Goodman, *Rosh HaShanah Anthology*, JPS (p 274ff)

Life; the thoroughly wicked in the Book of Death but the verdict on the intermediates is suspended from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur” –so they can get busy balancing their moral accounts during the Ten Days of Repentance. (TB Rosh HaShana 16b). Therefore immediately after Rosh HaShanah it is considered bad etiquette to wish your friends “May you be inscribed for good life.” Surely they have already been inscribed in the Book of Life and they only await Yom Kippur to have that verdict finalized and sealed – *Teichatemu* - hence the appropriate greeting – “May you be sealed for a good life.”

The Genesis Festival – “I will not be inscribed without You!” by Mordechai Gafni ⁴

I lead the opening ceremony of what is called in Israel “The Genesis Festival.” It is a wondrous gathering of some 25,000 people which takes place on Rosh HaShanah for young people who would not otherwise be in the synagogue, [so called “secular” Israelis though their search for spirituality does not match that description very well]. Several years ago we started a custom of having one hundred *shofarot* (ram’s horns) blown, together with 360 drummers to bid farewell to the past as we usher in the future. In the middle of this all, I give a short talk:

“On the New Year, our tradition teaches that those who merit are inscribed in the Book of Life. At this moment, the universe is judging who will live and who will die. Here at the Genesis festival of love, we will not allow God or his angels that choice. We will not allow judgment to separate us from each other. So I ask each one of you to turn to the person next to you and say - ‘I refuse to be written in the Book of Life...without you!’”

Letting Go of Perfection by Mordechai Gafni⁵

Perfectionism is but another disguise for control. Self love then means giving up on your own need to be perfect. Self love is to allow room for imperfection and failure. Emerson was right when he wrote, “There is a crack in everything that God has made.”

It’s like the old Japanese tea masters. When they made their utensils, they’d make sure that something, be it the tea scoop or the bowl, would have a flaw. A really nice and well-placed flaw, mind you, but still a flaw. If the thing was flawless, they would fix that. For every wisdom master knows, nothing is flawless.

The Hassidic master the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his disciples, “After you have gone, how will we know whether another spiritual master is true or false?”
“If he promises to teach you pure prayer, know that he is a false master.”

So, the first movement of forgiveness and love for yourself and others is to let go of the need for purity, which is really just a cover for total control.

⁴ *The Mystery of Love*, p. 166??

⁵ *The Mystery of Love*, p.205??

Even God Didn't Get it Right

For the Kabbalist, failure is built into the very fabric of existence. Ultimately, that means that God is both the source and model of failure. One of the least understood and most radical dimensions of Kabbalistic teaching is the model of a God who cannot seem to get it right the first time around.

Remember that in Renaissance Kabbalah, the primary image of creation is God force emanating light into vessels. For whatever reason, these vessels are structurally flawed. The flawed vessels are unable to hold the light streaming into them from the divine emanation. They shatter. Shards of vessels fall and disperse throughout reality. Many of the shards retain sparks of light. The purpose of existence is to gather the sparks of light, called *nitzotzot*, and reintegrate them with their divine source.⁸

What is essential in this kabalistic image is the centrality of failure. God tries to create the world. It doesn't work because the vessels shatter. Our whole lives are then spent trying to return to the original pristine state before the vessels shattered, the only difference being that this time when we return, we are humbler, wiser and able to transcend even the initial perfection with which we began.

An image from Talmudic mysticism: God "who creates worlds and destroys them." God is dissatisfied with his creation. He is the artist who tears up draft after draft until one spills from his brush that seems right.

We are imitators of divinity. We participate in divinity. Just as God stood on the abyss of darkness and said, "Let there be light," so do we stand on the abyss of darkness and say, "Let there be light." Just as God failed in his creative gesture yet reached deep within to find the love to create again, so do we.

D. *Tashlich*

On Rosh Hashana's first afternoon unless it is Shabbat, there is medieval custom to find a body of water and symbolically throw off our sins and bad habits by emptying your pockets.

My most impressive Tashlich ceremony was in the Canadian community of Niagra Falls where the congregation gathered at the edge of these powerful falls and emptied their pockets while the Japanese tourist swooped down to capture the moment on their cameras.

E. Yom Kippur Customs: Personal *Selichot*: A Moment of Reconciliation with Our Families and Friends

Find a private moment to tell individuals that you are sorry or at least recite this formula with the whole family on the meal before Yom Kippur:

“I am sorry if I have hurt you:
by what I have done or failed to do,
by what I said or have not said to you since last Yom Kippur.
I will try to improve and I ask for your understanding and forgiveness.”⁶

Ribono shel Olam *Master of the Universe*

I hereby forgive whoever has hurt me,
and whoever has done me wrong;
whether it was done deliberately or by accident, whether by word or by deed.
May no one be punished on my account. May it be your will. God and God of my
parents, that I sin no more, that I do not revert to my old ways, that I do not anger you
any more with my actions, and that I do not do that which is evil in your sight. Wipe
away the sins that I have committed with your great compassion.. May the words of my
mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before you, my rock and my
redeemer. Amen.

“Neither repentance nor Yom Kippur can atone for wrongs between human beings. One
must make restitution of the damage...Beyond that one must find a way to appease the
injured party even if one must ask forgiveness three times. ... After three tries then the
wrongdoer may stop asking and the responsibility falls on the one who refused to
forgive...

“It is forbidden to be cruel and to refuse to be appeased rather try to be easy to placate
and slow to anger and when someone [finds the courage] to request forgiveness, respond
by foregoing one’s due with a full heart and willing soul.”

Remember that one who forgives is more likely to be forgiven.⁷

Bene Yisrael in India

On the last day of Elul, the day before Rosh HaShanah, the congregation divides into two
halves facing one another. First one side stands, while the other sits. Those standing
recite the *Hatarah* – a prayer asking for forgiveness. Those sitting respond: “As we
forgive you, so may you be forgiven from on High.” Then those sitting down switch
places with those standing and in turn ask the others for forgiveness. Then they kiss one
another’s hands and return home.⁸

⁶ Based on *Machsor Hadash* quoted in Jack Riemer p. 237

⁷ adapted from Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Repentance 2:9-10

⁸ Philip Goodman, *The Rosh HaShanah Anthology*, p. 210

F. Reviewing the Rules for Fasting and for Eating on Yom Kippur

A Temporary Retreat from Life By Irving Greenberg⁹

“On the 10th day of the seventh month you shall afflict your souls” (Leviticus 16:29; 23:27; Numbers 29:7)

Denying the soul its due means, in Jewish tradition, giving up the fundamentals of dignified living: (1) eating and drinking, (2) washing and (3) anointing, that is, cosmetic lotions, and (4) sexuality. (In addition, one refrains from (5) wearing leather shoes which are an ancient status symbol). As on Shabbat, we stop work and avoid transfers of property [from place to place] and by implication, the amassing of wealth.

Yom Kippur symbolizes the rejection of the dependence of our well-being and dignity on these normal acts. It makes clear that in an ultimate sense, human well-being and dignity transcend the presence of everyday material pleasures. “Playing dead” gives a perspective on the vanity of conventional life. From this encounter we go back [after Yom Kippur] to the deepest enjoyment of life functions (especially on Sukkot – *z'man simchateinu*, the time of celebration) yet without any longer giving these pleasures ultimacy.

- (1) The primary self-denial is that of eating and drinking, even in minor amounts. However some people are exempted by Jewish law from these restrictions. The exempted are: the dangerously sick (whether there is a definite or merely a potential threat to life) and a pregnant woman. If a pregnant woman feels an irresistible urge to eat, then she may do so even without a doctor's certification ... In fact, if the dangerously sick patient says food is needed then, even if the doctors deny this, we are commanded to feed the patient. I recommend the [Lithuanian] Brisker tradition that the dangerously sick patients should be fed normally and fully... [When challenged for this leniency] Rabbi Chaim of Brisk used to say: “I am not treating Yom Kippur lightly, rather I am treating life-saving seriously.” In 1848 during a cholera epidemic, Rabbi Israel Salanter personally instructed the *entire* community of Vilna to eat. [On Yom Kippur morning he took a roll in his hand and stood on the pulpit and ate the roll before the eyes of the entire congregation that the people might see him and follow his example... for the life of even a single person was dear in his eyes ... -SY Agnon, *During a Cholera Epidemic in Days of Awe*]
- (2) (3) (4) As far as washing is concerned, it is cosmetic washing – for pleasure's sake- that is given up. Where there is dirt ... then regular washing of the necessary area is done. All anointing is given up as well. But a newly married bride at least washes her face so she will not appear unsightly to her husband [even though sexual intercourse is given up] (Ah, that romantic Jewish law)

⁹ *High Holiday Guide* (Clal 1977)

(5) Not wearing leather shoes is also correlated to the idea that an animal had to die to make the shoes possible. On the day we seek forgiveness and life, products of an act of killing are inappropriate for use.

A Day Not to Feel At Home with Yourself

SY Agnon quoted an insightful “Sermon on the Five Afflictions” in his collection *Days of Awe* with a mystical perspective: “God commanded that the body and the soul be afflicted with five afflictions in order to keep the soul from being at home in the body and to send it off to withdraw from the material world like an angel... For example, the soul is a unity and is at home only in a body where there is unity, that is, when a man and a woman are joined together, as it says, “and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). When we refrain from intercourse the body’s unity is lessened and the soul is not at home in the body. ... When a person is wearing shoes, then one is raised above the earth and the soul is at home in the body. But if one is barefoot and one’s feet stumble on the earth... the soul is not at home in the body.

Children Fasting

At what age should a child learn to fast? A child of ten and even one of nine may be trained to fast for few hours [by postponing their meals]. ... The child ought to fast according to his or her strength (Maimonides, Shevitat Asor 2:10)

A fine practice in Jerusalem was for sons and daughters of eleven to fast to midday, twelve years old, the entire day, and thirteen year olds [fasting for the first time as adults] were led around and presented to their elders to be praised and encouraged. (Soferim 18:5 in SY Agnon *Days of Awe*)

Pikuach Nefesh

Afflict your Soul, but Don’t You Dare Endanger your Life

By Maimonides (Mishne Torah, Shabbat 2:1,2,11)

Yom Kippur is called “*Shabbat Shabbaton*” – it is doubly Shabbat and so its sanctity. Like Shabbat, labor is forbidden on Yom Kippur but, unlike Shabbat, so is Oneg – bodily pleasures. Its total dedication to God is sometimes thought to justify fasting even where it might somehow cause – not just temporary and minor physical discomfort – but more serious medical problems. However the mitzvah of “afflicting one’s soul” does not undermine the principle that Shabbat and Yom Kippur and all of Jewish law, for that matter, are not intended by God to cause physical or emotional damage.

Shabbat is suspended when it comes to danger to human life... even if there is only a suspicion of a life-threatening condition. . When a pregnant woman is giving birth that is by definition a life-threatening emergency, so one desecrates Shabbat by calling a

midwife from another location, cutting the umbilical cord and tying it. In fact when a woman cries out during labor that she needs a candle, even if she is blind, we light one for her. For this will cause her to (relax emotionally and) maintain her sanity – even if she cannot see. ...” (Maimonides, Mishne Torah Shabbat 2:1,11).

The Talmud makes the point with a beautiful metaphor:

“Someone asked Rabbi Tanhum: ‘What is the ruling regarding extinguishing a candle on Shabbat for the sake of someone who is ill?’ Rabbi Tanhum replied: Both a candle and the soul of a human being are called “a candle / *ner*” (“For the soul of human is the candle of God.” – Proverbs 20:27). Therefore it is better to put out a candle lit by flesh and blood rather than a candle lit by the Holy One.” (TB Shabbat 30a)

The Talmud ruled that if either a sick person or a doctor felt that life was endangered – the Shabbat must be suspended. The opinion of two doctors who felt danger existed took precedence in Jewish law over the opinions of 100 doctors who felt otherwise (*Shulchan Aruch* O.H. 618:4). Similarly the Talmud ruled that even if 100 doctors believed there was no danger, if the sick person maintained that s/he felt endangered then the Shabbat must be suspended – “for the heart knows its own trouble” (*Proverbs 14:10*) (*T.B. Yoma 83a*). The Jerusalem Talmud was even more emphatic: “[In life-threatening situations when the Shabbat must be violated] the one who acts quickly is praiseworthy, the Rabbi who is asked his opinion deserves blame, and the one who asks the Rabbi is a spiller of blood.”

Maimonides continues to expand on the ultimate value of saving human life even on the holiest of days.

“In fact, whatever must be done to avoid a suspected life-threatening danger is to be done not by non-Jews, by children... but by the greatest scholars of Israel. One may not delay desecrating Shabbat for a dangerously ill patient for it says “do whatever a human being needs to in order to live – *v’chai bahem*” (Leviticus 18:5) – and not die (Sifra). . That teaches us that **the whole purpose of the laws of the Torah is not to bring vengeance into the world, but rather to engender compassion, kindness and peace in the world.**” (Maimonides, Mishne Torah Shabbat 2:3)¹⁰

There is no justification to understand fasting on Yom Kippur or refraining from work on Shabbat as an expression of a Judaism or a God who loves suffering and sacrifice for their own sake.

Concern for their Body and your Soul on a Fast Day

Rabi Yisrael Salanter once preached: “It is usual for a people to express concern for their own body and for their neighbor’s soul. They seldom worry about their own soul and the other’s body. However on Yom Kippur at least, we should disregard

¹⁰ Maimonides continues:
And those sectarians [the Karaites] who say that this is a desecration of Shabbat and forbidden – of them it is written “Also I have given them statutes which are not good, and laws they cannot live by.” (*Ezekiel 20:25*).

the needs of our body and pay attention to our soul. We need not concern ourselves with our neighbors' souls but chiefly with their bodily needs.

Time to Change Our Shoes before Yom Kippur

One of the five “afflictions of the soul” on Yom Kippur according to the rabbis is surprisingly enough removing our leather shoes. Today this usually means wearing cloth tennis shoes. In the Biblical verse used in the Talmud (??) to explain this prohibition, it recalls the aging King David taking flight from Jerusalem when his own son Avshalom rebelled against him and tried to kill him. Described as barefoot (II Samuel 15: 30) with his head covered like a mourner or a penitent, David understood his enforced exile as a punishment for his sins towards his children and his God (II Samuel 16: 11-12) and he hoped his suffering would serve to atone for his life and regain Divine favor. Leather shoes symbolize the status symbols of physical and psychological security that both a mourner and one who fasts on Yom Kippur eschew.

In addition, leather shoes, made for us without concern for the life of the animals, are hardly appropriate for a human being asking for Divine compassion.

Rabbi Haim David Halevi also opposed the killing of chickens for Kapparot for the same reason: “The essence of Yom Kippur is a day of mercy mixed with judgment and so it is inappropriate to show cruelty on a day of compassion when we are standing and pleading for mercy.” (*Asei L'cha Rav*, Rabbi Haim David Halevi, chief Sephardi rabbi of Tel Aviv, late 20th century).

The Shofar Shoes by Rabbi Avi Shafran¹¹

My family and I had the wonderful privilege of spending Yom Kippur in Baltimore with my father... My father blows the shofar at his shul on Rosh HaShanah. The blasts of the ram's horn call all who hear them, in Maimonides' words, to "awaken, sleepers, from your slumber," to reject the "silly distractions of the temporal world" we occupy; to focus on what alone is real: serving our Creator and being good to one another.

He recounted how his old cloth "Yom Kippur shoes" - leather footwear is forbidden on the Jewish Day of Atonement - had grown uncomfortable. These new "shofar shoes," however, he explained, were much better. ... He is someone, without question, who can appreciate a good shoe. As a child in a Polish shtetl, the only shoes he ever had were those first worn and outgrown by older siblings. To this day he attributes his size 6 EEE feet to the confining, ill-fitting footwear of his youth.

And during the years of World War II, when he and his yeshiva- colleagues found themselves unwilling guests of Josef Stalin in a Siberian labor camp, the frigid temperatures made foot-covering a matter not of comfort but of life or death. He recalls

¹¹ AM ECHAD RESOURCES
[Rabbi Avi Shafran is director of public affairs for Agudath Israel of America and serves as American director of Am Echad]

how he and his friends would wrap long pieces of cloth in layers around their feet for insulation. When he says the morning blessing "Who has provided me all my needs" (which, Jewish tradition teaches, refers to shoes), he surely relates to it better than most of us.

My father was so happy to discover that his new comfortable Yom Kippur shoes were "shofar shoes."

I didn't understand at first what a "shofar shoe" was, though, and I told him so. He smiled and responded patiently, "Why, each one has a shofar on it."

When I expressed skepticism, he went to his bedroom and emerged triumphantly with the footwear. And when he held them up for me to see, his Jewish eyes taught mine a lesson. I don't think I'll ever look at the Nike "swoosh" quite the same way again.

Leaving Well-worn Paths and Well-heeled Habits

"Remove the shoes from your feet for the place where you are standing is sacred ground."
(Exodus 3:5) - *Shal Na'alecha mei'al Raglecha*

The Hassidic rebbe Moshe from Kabrin (*Imrot Tehorot*) identified a spiritual pun in the Hebrew message with which God greeted Moshe at the burning bush in the desert. Remove not just your shoes from your feet, but "remove yourself from your *Raglecha* – the regular habits" that you have acquired by repeated travel on the same well-worn-paths. In Hebrew (*regel*) as in Latin (*regula*), the same word refers both to foot and to habits. The Rebbe Moshe learned from the experience of his namesake Moshe Rabbenu that "once you remove yourself from habitual thinking, you will see that the place on which you stand - your standing or your stage (*madreiga* –or rung of spiritual development) is itself sacred soil. For in every place, every period and every moment you can discover the Holy One (revealed to you)."

G. Kapparot and the Scapegoat

Kapparot is perhaps the most bizarre custom for modern mentality and yet it is attractive because it is exotic. Originally it involved a live chicken – male or female according to the designated family member over whose head it was swung -embers head. Then it was slaughtered as if reenacting the Biblical scapegoat sacrifice of Yom Kippur. The scapegoat replaces us on the chopping block. Many rabbis, traditional and modern, who have objected to this problematic custom, have suggested that coins be substituted for the chicken and they be given by us to the poor

Kapparot: Replacing Chickens with Tzedakah Money

Directions:

- | |
|---|
| 1. DISTRIBUTE coins or bills for each participant at the table. |
| 2. RECITE, if you wish, some of the Biblical verses in the footnotes. ¹² |
| 3. The leader RECITES in Hebrew or English the formula “This is my Replacement.” The participants repeat after the leader, phrase by phrase, while swinging the Tzedaka money over their heads. |
| 4. DEPOSIT the money in a Tzedaka box, consult and allocate the funds to an organization and ask for someone at the table to volunteer to actually deliver the money or mail it to the beneficiary. |

**This is my replacement,
this is my stand-in,
this is my atonement!
May this money go for Tzedakah
and may we enter a good, long life peace.**

¹² Bnei Adam yoshveikofer (Psalm 107:10, 14 2:3,17,21 Translation??

***Kapparot* : Chickens turn into Coins for the Needy**

The ancient custom of *Kapparot* – purchasing alive fowl [a male rooster for a man and a hen for woman] and waving it as “exchange” over the head of family members before it is slaughtered and eaten. Established in Geonic time (8th-9th century Babylonia) this custom is undoubtedly a folk attempt to substitute for the scapegoat ceremony of Biblical times. [But, said the rabbis who were very ambivalent or downright opposed to this custom:]

“Let a person not think that this is really atonement ... let one criticize one’s own sins and then the Holy One will accept one’s repentance”
(Solomon Ganzfried, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, Orach HaHaim 131:1).

For those [among you] who will settle for nothing less than the original Biblical scapegoat, or whose fresh fowl supply is low or whose rationalism quotient is high, money is usually substituted for the live creature. The money is given to the poor or Tzedakah [just as the chickens themselves were once given to the needy].¹³

Comparing the use of scapegoat in the Torah (Leviticus 16) and in modern political language is intriguing. In the Torah the priest confesses to his own and his community’s sins and then they are transferred to the scapegoat to carry them to death in the wilderness. However in modern anti-Semitism the Jews are considered the scapegoats in which the community denies its sins and projects them, onto the innocent minority viewed as an alien other.

¹³ Irving Greenberg, *High Holiday Guide* (Clal 1977)

H. *Kol Nidrei*

Kol Nidrei aroused many objections from halachic authorities since its inception in the period of the Geonim. **Some argued that vows cannot be abrogated after the fact wholesale but only when an individual comes to a court to explain why his original vow was invalid.** Some introduced a change of tense so that only future vows are cancelled. Others objected that the goal of Yom Kippur was to encourage repentance such that one lives up to commitments, not avoids them through legal fictions. However by popular demand in direct opposition to many rabbinical authorities, people maintained that like *Tashlich*, *Kapparot* and of course the priestly scapegoat, they need a technical means to remove their sins.

Heshbon haNefesh: Poetic Self-Examination before Yom Kippur **By Yehuda Amichai**

I am a kosher person. I bring up the cud in my soul
From the closed darkness of what is over and done with
So as not to forget, so as not to lose. Once again “Renew our days as of old,”
Once again, “*Isru Chag*,” to continue the holiday for another day.
One who has seen cows crouching in the stall chewing their cud—
An expression of delight and tranquility on their faces and the recollection of
 The green grass
In the eye and on the tongue—knows real contentment.

I am cloven, as well. I do not have hooves but I do have
A split soul. The split, the cleft gives me the wherewithal to stand
While I smite myself as in the “*Al Het*” striking
Of Rosh HaShannah or as one who searches for something
Lost and strikes coat and pockets in order
 To find it.
For perhaps I have forgotten over what sin I strike myself.
I want to add to the “*Ashamnu, Bagadnu*”
The words “We have forgotten,” “We have remembered,”
Two sins for which there is
No atonement. They should cancel each other out,
But they reinforce each other.
I am a kosher person.¹⁴

¹⁴ Steve Sager translations of Yehuda Amichai’s *Patuach Sagur Patuach* p.14, #20