

**Massachusetts Board of Rabbis – High Holiday Sermon Seminar for 5774
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This version of the handout contains many extra notes and examples. It is an expansion of the handout given at the live seminar. Of course, not all the material covered in person is included in writing, but all the sermons mentioned *are* included in DRAFT form. Please do not share these rough drafts with others, but feel free to use the concepts and stories (with attribution, where you can and where appropriate).

Please note that the outline is in Cambria size 12 font and quotations of other materials are in Times New Roman size 11 font, to help distinguish the two. So if you want to cut straight to quotations and sermons, just look for the size 11 Times Roman font.

It was my pleasure and honor to speak to so many colleagues from Massachusetts, and I hope we can learn and celebrate together again soon.

L'shana tova!

– Debra

How do we prepare ourselves?

- This is the most important question. If the sole/soul focus of “getting ready” for the High Holidays is getting the sermons ready, then we will miss out on the season, and on true depth in the sermons.
- What are we doing with our own entrenched patterns of unforgiveness and sin? How are we conducting *cheshbon hanefesh* this year? How are we replenishing ourselves, so we will have more to give?
- We can't give away what we don't have.
- The first person you need to inspire as we approach the High Holiday season is yourself.

How do we prepare the environment? (or “loving them helps them hear you”)

- Sermons are one small part of what we do. 15-40 minutes, depending on the community, out of a three to six hour service.
 - Our words are important.
But sermons are not our only words.
And words are not our only communication.
 - So let's step back and look at the environment we create.
 - If sermons have support of other elements of the service, that will help them reach people.
 - If the other elements are **not** in place, then people may not be able to hear you above their concerns and resentments.
- Signs and directions
NO CELL PHONES! vs. To protect the prayerful atmosphere, please turn off all electronic devices vs. We're all for recharging! But today, the focus is souls and not cell phones. Please turn off all electronic devices while in the building.
- Ushers: Ticket Tyrants or Messengers from On High?

Apply all of the above—story, invitation, intention, question. When have you?

- Ushers as angels, board members as hosts
 - Meet with the ushers group in advance.
 - Share with them your vision of their role.
 - Quote from Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming*. Summary: when we consider ourselves *hosts* of the synagogue, we behave in a much more welcoming fashion than when we consider ourselves *guests* or even *members*. How do you welcome people into your home? How will you welcome people into your spiritual home, the synagogue.
- Bless & “deputize” the choir, junior congregation leaders, etc.
- Provisions for families with young children
 - Are there snacks and a lunch for children? If not, parents must choose between praying and taking their kids home for lunch.
 - Which of the following does your synagogue provide? Special seating near aisle, a quiet room, a nursing room, a room with toys where the service is piped in, changing tables equipped with diapers and wipes, stuffed animals and board books in the sanctuary, etc.
- Provisions for the hearing impaired
- Provisions for other disabilities
 - Where will people put their walkers?
 - Who needs an aisle seat for health reasons?
- “First comfort” as well as first aid
 - Serving muffins before Musaf is the most extreme example (but skip this on Yom Kippur) ☺
 - Especially if the thermostat setting is a source of controversy, provide the ushers with a supply of shawls or throws for those who may be cold.
 - Have tissues available in the sanctuary and sanitary supplies in the bathrooms.
 - Ask staff or volunteers to clean and refresh the bathrooms during services.
- Extra tallitot on the bimah
 - If you have the policy that everyone called up for an aliyah or other honor needs wears a tallit, then have them available, to be supplied without embarrassment or fanfare, for anyone who forgets or doesn’t know that policy.
- Alleviate honors anxiety
 - Assign an honors coach/gabbai to bring people to the “bull pen” (seats near the bimah, so they will be close at hand for their honor) and to answer any questions
 - Distribute detailed instructions for honors in advance, with the invitation or as soon as people accept the honor.
 - Schedule an honors demonstration to occur 15 minutes before each service, in which a gabbai or Ritual Committee member reviews the choreography of aliyot, show where the “peticha” cord is,

- Transliteration?
 - Is it easy to access and to read?
 - Do you sacrifice the English to read it?
 - Do you have to ask for it (and potentially feel “like a fool”) or are plenty of copies there for the taking?

How do we prepare our students and congregants?

- Send links in advance of the holidays that support your messages
 - I shared with colleagues at the live event a Louie Schwartzberg video available on youtube. The following is the letter I sent to my congregation in advance of High Holidays 5772.

Dear Friends,

As the High Holidays (quickly!) approach, I wanted to share with you this find from the internet. It is a ten-minute TED talk, including a documentary clip. I hope that it will inspire you as it did me.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXDMoiEkyuQ&feature=youtu.be>

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, and this video reveals its beauty in ways that cultivate both awe and appreciation.

In the Torah portion leading up to High Holidays (Deut. 30:6), God promises to soften our hearts and remove any barriers around them, leaving us open-hearted, tender, and receptive. This video can be an aid in fulfilling that promise. Just watch the time lapse photography and "make like a flower."

A life review, encouraged at this time of year, is not just about facing sin or healing from pain. It is also about paying attention to what works in your life. Are you truly aware of your blessings and gifts? This video reminds us of all there is to be grateful for.

The video culminates in a tribute to "today" – one of the grand themes of High Holidays. We declare in our prayers, “*Hayom* harat olam – today the world was born.” Our cantor sings, “*Hayom, Hayom, Hayom, Hayom, Hayom, Hayom.*” Today is a gift; it is so vital a gift that we won't have any other gifts if we can't embrace it. I don't want to over-sell this link, but I love it for reminding us of that simple truth.

Here it is again.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXDMoiEkyuQ&feature=youtu.be>

I look forward to sharing the Holidays with you.

L'shanah tovah,

Rabbi Debra Orenstein

- Offer meditations
 - <http://www.rabbidebra.com/elul-meditations.html>
 - http://www.rabbidebra.com/support-files/chai_elul_meditations.pdf
 - Tweet on teshuvah, facebook on forgiveness
 - Start early: when does “the High Holiday season” begin?
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- Selichot? Nitzavim? Elul? Va'etchanan? Tisha B'av? Shelach?
- The following is a link to an article about Va'etchanan that I used as a starting point for High Holidays. Please take note of the bio; exercising some "holy chutzpah," I set some extravagant intentions about the transformations we could look forward to on the Days of Awe.
http://www.jewishjournal.com/torah_portion/article/but_whos_complaining_20070727/
- Everyone gets a Tisha B'av. No one escapes national and personal tragedy. But we have to choose to have a Rosh Hashanah; it's up to us whether we will deliberately look at the part *we* may have played in our own pain, and then make a fresh start.
- The ticket envelope
 - This is the one envelope you can be sure your congregants will open all year. Will it just be filled with logistics? How can you promote your vision and message?
 - Consider "swag" and "do-dads." A refrigerator magnet with a catchy saying may do more to promote your message all year long than the High Holiday sermon you give.
- Honors communications
 - The following is a letter that went out to all congregants in our ticket envelope:

Torah In and Out of the Ark: A Spiritual Perspective on Honors

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

At synagogues around the world, Jews will soon ascend the *bimah* (pulpit) and receive honors on some of our holiest days. From year to year, the CBI Honors Committee works hard to ensure a rotation, so that members are asked to participate at least every few years. This sends that message that each member is honored, not just technically, with a task to do on High Holidays, but deeply and lastingly, with acknowledgment and appreciation. (If there has been an oversight and you haven't received an invitation in some time, please let a board member know.)

Even if you do not open the ark, recite the blessings as the Torah is read, lift the Torah, or otherwise assist during services this year, **everyone present in the congregation participates in the honors process.** The people in the pews are the actual purveyors of honor. It is your attention, your well wishes, your energy that honors people when they ascend the *bimah*. Among your prayers this season, I encourage you to pray for those who take part in the service. This is, of course, easy and natural to do when you know them personally. If a community member whom you don't yet know takes part, you can certainly pray, "May they be blessed! May they have a good and sweet year!" And, of course, wish them a hearty "*yashar koach*" (continued strength) when they come off the *bimah*.

The honors of opening and closing the ark have many layers of meaning. During the Torah service, we open the ark to the words from Numbers 10:35: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses would say." (*Vayehi binso'ah ha'aron vayomer Moshe.*) The liturgy quotes the formula that Moses spoke when the ark moved. "Rise up, Adonai, and let Your enemies be scattered; let those who hate You flee before You." (*Kumah Adonai veyafutzu oyvecha veyanusu misanecha mipanecha.*) And when the Torah was returned to its resting place, Moses would say, "Return, Adonai, to the many thousands among the people of Israel." (*Shuvah Adonai rivevot alfei Yisrael.*) To this day, those are among the words that we recite as we replace the Torah in the ark.

The person who opens the ark stands, as it were, in Moses' place. He or she sets the Torah and the children of Israel in motion – literally and figuratively – by the simple removal of a curtain. And the words associated with that task are spiritually powerful indeed. They imply: don't identify with the Torah lightly. Torah has its lovers and its enemies. We must support the former and beware of the latter. The words from Numbers can also be understood as a reflection of individual spirituality. In that sense, the ark opener is the catalyst for a daring prayer:

May everything in me and in us that fights holiness be exiled and scattered to the four winds. And may I, together with the entire Jewish people, be a worthy host to God's holiness. May we be a safe and deserving place for Torah to rest.

When you open the ark, it is as if you are standing by the Torah and launching its entry into our community, just as Moses launched its entry among the ancient Israelites.

The role of the person closing the ark is no less important. So often, in Western culture today, we begin with gusto, with respect, with energy ... and then just peter out. It's not enough to release the energy of Torah into the congregation by opening the ark. It's vital, too, to protect that energy, to treat it with respect, to return it to its resting place (the ark) and, symbolically, its Source (God). When we return the Torah to the ark during a Torah service, we recite words directly related to the themes of High Holidays. The Rabbis assembled words from throughout the Bible, and recast them, out of context, as a dialogue between God and the Jewish people about how we can return to one another.

The people to God: "Return, Adonai, to the many thousands among the people of Israel."

God to the people: "It is a good inheritance I have given you. Do not forsake My Torah."

The people's compromise: "Return us to you, Adonai, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old."

When you close the ark, it is as if you are testifying to that covenant of renewal and return.

The role of those carrying, lifting, or dressing the Torah is to bring Torah into community and then, respectfully, back to its resting place. Our scroll has two wooden spindles, on which it cannot stand. Torah can stand only when carried and carried out, lifted and uplifted, by community. It depends on us. Torah is held on the right shoulder, leaving the heart space (left side) open to receive it.

Congregational Honors: Logistics & Intentions

- If you have any questions about how to carry out your honor, please consult with our clergy or a board member in advance or, if needed, on the day of the honor.
- The ark doors are opened on the bimah before services begin. The parochet (curtain) is opened or closed by honorees at appropriate times during the service.
- When on the bimah, you are invited and encouraged to wear a tallit, as well as a head covering. At the same time, we understand that not all women are comfortable wearing a tallit and/or kippah (yarmulke).
- It is customary to face the ark while – and even after – you open it. You may feel a pull, out of politeness, to face the "audience." Of course, we all know that services are a participatory experience of prayer, not a show. When the ark is opened, it is a time in the service when you, as

well as the congregation, are relating keenly and visually to the Torah. Facing Torah, rather than turning your back on it, will help others, too, to focus on the holiness of the moment.

- In the midst of the logistics, take a moment to pray. Standing before the ark, you have a unique opportunity for prayer. Just as prayer requests placed into the crevices of the Western Wall are said to ascend quickly to the Heavenly throne, a prayer said before an open ark has a special route upward. With close physical proximity to the Torah, you may also feel a special closeness and intimacy with the Divine.
- It is customary to give tzedakah after sunset, when the holiday concludes, or during the days following the holiday, particularly when honored. We invite you to use this honor as an opportunity to give extra tzedakah or do another mitzvah that you might not otherwise have planned. This way, the occasion of your being honored increases holiness in the world.
- Occasionally, through human error or the exigencies of time, we end up cutting an honor from the service. If that happens, we will try to find a suitable and similar honor for you at the next possible opportunity. Please let a board member know if your honor was skipped. It was probably a mistake, and we would like to correct it. Thank you for being a member of the CBI family. We appreciate you and honor your contributions.
 - Invite Advance Communication From Congregants About High Holiday Themes.
 - Solicit feedback and commentary at the start of Elul and repeat the invitation to participate toward the end of the summer (or if the Jewish calendar allows) after Labor Day to maximize participation.
 - I have requested responses to “fill-in-the-blank”-style questions on High Holiday themes, as this reduces both any “intimidation factor” and the time commitment I am asking. I then edit the answers I receive into a prayer that is recited during services.
 - When people hear their own and their neighbors’ words, it holds a special power for them – prayer becomes immediately personal and relevant (even if the writing lacks the elegance of, say, an Andre Ungar). See one example below.

THE FOLLOWING WAS THE INVITATION:

Uvechein (“And therefore” or “And thus”)
 Congregation Bnai Israel ♦ www.bisrael.com ♦ 5771
 Rabbi Debra Orenstein ♦ Cantor Lenny Mandel

The *Uvechein* prayer was written by Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri, a leading scholar of the first and second centuries, C.E. Known for his erudition, he is considered to be the author of 40 different laws from the Mishnah. Rabbi Yochanan was highly compassionate in his interpretations of Jewish law, allowing room for human error and considering, always, the needs of the poor. He was so expert a student of geometry that people believed he could be relied upon to estimate the number of drops in the ocean! Because he was so pious, it is said that those who dream of Rabbi Yochanan can expect to develop greater fear of sin and reverence for God.

There are three main paragraphs to *Uvechein*. (The last sentence can be considered a “coda” to the prayer.) *Uvechein* means “and thus” or “and therefore.” Rabbi Yochanan wanted his words to be recited as part of the *Kedushah* (Sanctification of God’s Name) prayers.

In essence, *Uvechein* answers the question: “**Now that we acknowledge God’s glory and holiness, therefore...what?**” What do we see? What are we committed to? How are our intentions shaped? How might our very being be transformed?

Rabbi Yochanan’s three answers follow the High Holiday themes of *Malchuyot* (God’s sovereignty), *Zichronot* (divine memory), and *Shofarot* (vision of a Messianic future).

The original prayer, in translation:

The first paragraph deals with what it means to say that God reigns – both in the universe and in your own life.

And thus, Eternal One, our God, instill Your fear in all Your works and holy dread in all You created;
That all creation shall be in awe and all creatures shall worship You.

Then all shall unite as one to do Your will wholeheartedly.

For we know, Eternal One, our God, authority rests in You;

Power and strength are in Your right hand, and Your name evokes awe in all You created.

The second paragraph expresses the joy that comes from God remembering the Jewish people.

And thus, Eternal One, let there be honor for Your people, glory for those who revere You,

Hope for those who seek You, and a voice for those who long for You.

Let there be rejoicing for Your land, and happiness for Your city;

Let the tradition of David, Your servant, flourish

And the Light of the Messianic era shine soon in our days.

The third Uvechein offers a vision of a perfected world.

And thus shall the just see and be glad, the upright exult, and the devoted ones rejoice in song.

For the mouth of injustice shall be shut, and all evil shall vanish like smoke,

When You sweep away the rule of wickedness from the earth.

Then You alone, Eternal One, shall reign over all Your works

On Mount Zion, where Your Presence dwells and in Jerusalem, Your holy city.

The coda summarizes and supports the prayer with a favorite quotation:

As it is written in your holy scriptures: “The Eternal will reign forever; your God, O Zion, for all generations. Hallelujah! [Psalm 146].”

**Please see the reverse side of the page to continue the Jewish tradition of creative prayer
by contributing your own *Uvechein* thoughts.**

**Creating a Prayer for Our Community Today ... With Your Help
an invitation from your rabbi and cantor**

We want to give you the opportunity to write your own responses to the prayer on the reverse side of this page, per the prompts below. (Of course, you are invited to do all four, but you can also skip some, if you so choose.) For Yom Kippur, we will create a communal prayer based on what you and others share. Please use either the space provided below or separate sheets/email windows.

–*Rabbi Debra Orenstein and Cantor Lenny Mandel*

Kindly email your answers to rabbi@bisrael.com or bring them to synagogue by Tuesday, 9/14.

If God’s holiness flows unrestricted through all Creation...therefore I say/praise/ask offer/question/consider/marvel/know/believe/appreciate/anticipate what comes next, as follows about

Malchuyot/God's sovereignty:

A question that may prove helpful: If you could know and feel God's holiness throughout the earth, wherever you looked, how would that inform your understanding and experience of God in history, God in nature, and/or God operating in your own life?

If God's holiness flows unrestricted through all Creation... therefore I say/praise/ask offer/question/consider/marvel/know/believe/appreciate/anticipate what comes next, as follows about *Zichronot*/holy remembrances by God and by human beings:

Questions that may prove helpful: If you could know and feel God's holiness throughout the earth, wherever you looked, what would that cause you to remember? What memories would you dwell on – and which would you let go? What would you believe about divine memory and remembrance?

If God's holiness flows unrestricted through all Creation... therefore I say/praise/ask/offer/question/consider/marvel/know/believe/appreciate/anticipate what comes next, as follows about *Shofarot*/all that the Shofar symbolizes and stirs up for you:

A question that may prove helpful: If you could know and feel God's holiness throughout the earth, wherever you looked, how would that affect your response to Shofar as an alarm, a call to wake up and repent, a reminder of the sacrifice of Isaac, the sound of revelation at Mt. Sinai, the heralding of Messiah, and/or the announcement of redemption?

Please include a favorite quotation (from Scripture or elsewhere) that supports what you have written:

USING THE RESPONSES I RECEIVED, I EDITED TOGETHER THE FOLLOWING RESPONSIVE READINGS:

MALCHUYOT – ZICHRONOT – SHOFAROT (Composed by members of CBI)

On Malchuyot/Sovereignty (edited from contributions by members of CBI)

When I stood at the rim of the grand canyon in awe

When I pay attention to what is lingering in the back of my mind

When I marveled at how a fierce wind knocked down trees that had stood for decades

When I remember to pay attention to what is right in front of me

When I heard from a survivor about how he saved a Torah during the Holocaust

When I stand under a star-lit sky and feel our place in the universe

When I recite the prayer of thanks for the gifts that surround us daily and the miracles that accompany us morning, noon, and night.

When I traveled, the summer after 9/11, to see the beauty of the western United States

When I read, during those travels, a sign at Dead Horse Pike, Utah: "This must have been what God had in mind when He created the world."

When I see the beauty of beginning anew each and every day

When I watch my children grow

Then I know that God is a reality – even the reality. Adonai Melech.

On Zichronot/Remembrance (edited from contributions by members of CBI)

Memories, both good and bad, shape our lives. A single memory can be so engrained in my consciousness, while others who participated in the same situation have no recollection whatsoever. Our internal visualizations can bring great comfort or great pain.

I am grateful for the ability to remember, to choose my focus, and to craft a narrative that is both true and holy.

The High Holidays are a time to think about the memorable moments of the past year and to review memories from the past that still weigh on us. Have any of them gone out of focus? Do we need to let something go or to sharpen an image again so as to hold fast to it?

We have the power to shape not all, but many, components of our lives and, therefore, the memories that we create. Will they carry us toward, or hold us back from, the true purpose of our lives?

On these Days of Awe, we honor the collective memory of our families and community. I am connected to every relative on my family tree, even if I don't know any names beyond my own grandparents.

I remember now my relatives and their small kindnesses to me and my siblings when we were children.

I am connected to every Jew who came before me, as I remember our history. Viscerally, deeply, I feel a sense of responsibility both to generations past and to those yet to come.

That God remembers us and what we have done inspires me, paradoxically, to forget. On these Days of Remembrance, I forget past hurts and grievances. I forget failures and mistakes. I concentrate, instead, on what I can do in this New Year that would be worthy of God's remembrance.

Baruch ata adonai, zocher umazkir habrit.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who remembers -- and causes us to remember -- the Covenant.

On Shofarot/Redemption (edited from contributions by members of CBI)

There have been times when a *tekiah gedolah* has literally taken my breath away. I think that is what the Shofar is meant to do: shake you to the core, interrupt what is usual and normal, and, in those few seconds, give you the chance to think and feel in a new way.

The Shofar is my annual alarm clock, reminding me to wake up and evaluate my life. It is not just about repentance, but rather redirection. What would I do differently if the situation presented itself? What choices would I reconsider? What words would I take back if I could? Are there words that went unspoken that should now be expressed?

Maimonides taught: "When the Shofar sounds it is as if to say, "Wake up sleepy ones from your slumbers, seek out your deeds, rethink and return and remember your Creator. Wake up, those who forget the truth in their idle use of time. Look at your souls and improve your ways."

I listen to the urgency of the Shofar and awaken to the understanding that there are always things I can do to make myself a better person and the world a better place.

It is important that I am not hearing the Shofar in solitude, but as one with my synagogue community along with all other synagogue communities.

We thank you, God, for our collective strength, for the gift of hearing, and for the power of choice.

- Sharon Brous sends out a question for contemplation each year, and makes a booklet of people's answers. Here is a sample communication she granted me permission to share with you:

What was the moment that changed everything?

e·piph·a·ny: noun. a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple or commonplace experience.

Revelation. An insight.

Maybe it struck you at Yom Kippur services. Maybe at Yosemite. Maybe on the treadmill.

Today is the first day of Elul, the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah. If done right, the High Holy Days can wake us and shake us and reshape our lives. But for the holy magic of the holidays to kick in next month, we have to start preparing and repairing now. Last year, I asked you to share a story about a time when you unstuck yourself. Hundreds of you submitted your stories - heartbreaking, hilarious, profound and inspiring - and we created [UNSTUCK](#), a sacred testament to our ability to let go and grow, to unstuck.

This year, we are collecting our best stories of *epiphany* to affirm one of the core spiritual claims of the High Holy Days: that every day can be the birth of something completely new. That, as Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin taught, "a single moment of illuminated awareness is worth more than all the wealth of the world."

Think of a time - maybe this past year, maybe years ago - when an experience or realization changed you forever. It can be big or small: an extraordinary event you witnessed or a small comment you overheard in a crowded coffee shop. What matters is that it changed you. It gave you hope. It exposed a truth. It awakened in you the need to shift course. It broke your heart or it helped you begin to heal. It offered perspective on the tangled mess of love and loss. We'll compile our best, most inspiring stories to share with the community at Rosh Hashanah this year.

Please take some time over the next couple of hours or weeks and [send me a paragraph or two](#). You can submit anonymously or include your name. And once again, extra points if you make me cry. Please take a few minutes and join me in this exercise. And *hodesh tov* - I pray that it is a month of inspiration and mobilization. I look forward to celebrating new possibilities with you.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Sharon Brous

- Invite Q & A
 - In synagogues where people write on the holidays, you can have pencils and index cards ready, and integrate questions and answers throughout the service.
 - In synagogues where it is the practice to refrain from writing, you can solicit questions in advance of – and between – the holidays.
 - My CD's and itunes downloads contain examples of questions and answers from my time at Makom Ohr Shalom.
 - I use q & a as introductions to prayers by matching the question with a prayer that relates to it. Since questions are submitted by congregants, my kavvanot/introductions are (I hope correctly) perceived as responding to a need and an inquiry, rather than just "the rabbi's bright idea" or an intrusion on the service. The extemporaneous nature of this speaking also makes it engaging.

Rosh Hashanah is asking us to create a NEW year by renewing ourselves. Doing something new would seem to help with that task. At the same time, people (including clergy) are very attached to familiar customs. How do we innovate at the most “traditional” time of the year?

- Short kavvanot can become part of the flow, rather than interruptions of it
 - Barechu – when you can think of something you are grateful for, please rise.
 - As the ark is opened, let it be a reminder to us to open our hearts.
 - A short quote to prepare for a prayer. E.g., from Herschel Matt on Barechu:
 - How many blessings come to us
Each week, each day, each hour.
Indeed, at each and every moment of our lives.
Blessings beyond count,
Beyond our deserving, they come to us.
Let us bless god
For blessing us so richly.
 - Before each recitation of the concluding lines of the Unetaneh Tokef, share a variety of brief quotations on “what is teshuvah?” “what is tefillah?” and “what is tzedakah?” A few dozen one-liners can be found my website at <http://www.rabbidebra.com/teshuvah-quotations.html>
- Distribute individual quotations as people walk in to the service.
 - I try to create at least 400 new & different quotations (almost exclusively from Jewish sources) around themes of the Holidays and/or my sermons each year. Each person walking in picks a message from a basket to receive a message that is rare, if not unique. For the most part, people will get a new message at every service. If an individual (over the course of multiple services) or two relatives pick the same quote, they tend to see that as a message, rather than a redundancy. I encourage folks to take the quote as a personal message. It can become a prism through which to view the service, a “mantra” you return to, or (if it doesn’t seem to “fit”) a blessing you are holding for a future time or another person.
 - Once during the holidays, I may ask people to introduce themselves, wish each other a shana tova, and share their quotes. This spreads the messages and also gives people something concrete to “do” when greeting one another.
 - I may connect the quotations to a prayer. I might ask people to read the quote they received and consider: how is it a commentary on the Shema & Veahavta? Or how does it relate to one of the al chet’s we are about to recite?
 - Most of the time, distribution of quotations adds absolutely no time to the service. It is a remarkably time-effective way of acknowledging each person individually and promoting your sermon themes.
 - I know people who have kept these strips of paper for years!

- <http://www.rabbidebra.com/jewish-holidays.html> includes many quotations on High Holiday themes.
- One new song can become a theme.
 - Sing it repeatedly during High Holidays at transitional times, to come out of a silence (at the end of the Amidah or following a meditation).
 - Use a song as a chatimah to your sermon, so everyone “sings” the message.
 - Songs I have used in the past include the following:

RETURN AGAIN (by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach)

Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.

Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are

Born and reborn again.

HOLY SPIRIT (adapted by Rabbi Debra Orenstein)

“*Ruach kodshecha al tikach mimeni*—Do not take your Holy Spirit away from me.” – *Shema Koleynu*

Rain on me, rain on me, Holy Spirit, rain on me.

Yesterday’s gone; today I’m in need. Ruach Hakodesh, rain on me.

Shine on me... Breathe on me... Dwell in me...

Loving me, loving me, Holy Spirit is loving me.

Yesterday’s gone; today I believe. Ruach Hakodesh, barchi oti (Holy Spirit, bless me).

Ruach Hakodesh, barchi oti. (Holy Spirit, bless me).

NARROW BRIDGE (Bratslaver words and melody)

Kol ha’olam koolo gesher tzar me’od, gesher tzar me’od, gesher tzar me’od.

Kol ha’olam koolo gesher tzar me’od, gesher tzar me’od.

Veha-eekar, veha-eekar lo lefached, lo lefached klal.

Veha-eekar, veha-eekar lo lefched klal.

All the world is a very narrow bridge, very narrow bridge, very narrow bridge.

All the world is a very narrow bridge, just a narrow bridge.

And above all, above all is not to fear, not to fear at all.

And above all, above all, is not to fear at all.

LOVE, SERVE, REMEMBER (by John Astin)

Why have you come to earth, do you remember?

Why have you taken birth?

Why have you come?

To love... to serve and remember.

To love... to serve and remember.

Ehov... sharet vezakhor.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? (by Chris Rene – X Factor)

O maybe we can take our chances, or maybe we can see

What's on your mind

I wonder if we look, inside our hearts, exactly what we'd find

Maybe we could take a lot of pain away

Maybe we could heal the world today

Maybe you know something I don't

If you do, then tell me

Where do we go from here
 God only knows

- Choose one prayer or one phrase & focus the community's attention on it
 - E.g. uvechein (above) was emphasized in advance of the holiday and during services.
- Choose a relatively "unclaimed" time – second day, Jonah, pesukei dezimrah, tashlich, Yom Kippur break, eyleh ezkerah, etc.
 - Avoid turf wars.
 - Those who come and participate will be self-selected and willing.
- "Grow" the mishebeirach into a healing meditation or even a complete healing service over the course of a few years.
 - Remember, not too much change all at once.
- Opt-in or opt-out choices:
 - invite congregants to visit the ark and commune with God and Torah during Neilah
 - invite congregants to participate in prostrations during the grand aleynu
 - private prayer booth (originally suggested by Sharon Brous; executed at my synagogue with advance communication and the following short introduction, included on the cover of the High Holiday handouts booklet)

High Holiday Songs & Readings – Congregation B'nai Israel

Rabbi Debra Orenstein – Cantor Lenny Mandel – Emerson, NJ – (201) 265-2272 – www.bisrael.com

These booklets are for use here at CBI throughout the holidays. If you are returning for another High Holiday service, please care for this booklet as you do your *machzor* (prayer book), and return it to the shelves or ushers following services. If this is your last High Holiday service with us, you are welcome to take this booklet home.

SOMETHING NEW IN OUR SANCTUARY

Since we seek renewal and rejuvenation in the New Year, it only makes sense to try something new on these days of awe. New readings follow. New melodies will be sung. And, this year, there is something new in our sanctuary: a private prayer booth.

Prayer is both completely communal and profoundly private. Throughout the year, we balance the personal and the communal by including private, silent reflection during the Amidah, as well as communal singing and recitation. What could be more personal than reciting Kaddish for a parent, sibling, child, or spouse? Yet, we require a minyan -- the witnessing and supportive "Amen's" of community -- for saying Kaddish. At any given point, when you walk into a synagogue, you will find most of the congregation singing or reading together, but a few people might be covering their heads with a tallis for privacy, or just lingering on a page that others had long since left. For genuine piety, we need the grounding and mutual aspiration of community -- and we also need to be free to stray from them.

High Holidays are an extreme example. We are absorbed with the most personal questions possible: Who am I? Why am I here? How have I lived up to my purpose this year? How can I do better? But we come

together to do that individual introspection. In ancient days, the High Priest would enter a private prayer booth, called the Holy of Holies, where he would engage in personal prayers for himself and his family and then prayers for his tribe, the Jewish community, and the world.

This year at Congregation B'nai Israel, you will notice in the back of the synagogue a small divider that creates a protected space. The back corner is not cut off from the community, but privacy is preserved. This personal prayer space is available throughout the service. Whenever you feel the need for a private moment, please head back there and take a turn in the space, decorated with High Holiday inspiration from both ancient ancestors and the children of our Hebrew School. This past Tuesday, our children discussed traditional High Holiday questions and generated some of their own. They used art and calligraphy to express those questions, and then Alec (Shimshon) Corring, a recent Bar Mitzvah and aspiring cartoonist, installed and added to their contributions. I hope that you will enjoy the prayer booth that was created by and for our community.

Please take some time for privacy amidst community during these Holy Days. If you choose to keep your experience private, of course, that is your privilege. If you choose to share it with me, your family, or your fellow congregants, we stand ready to listen, to learn, to witness, and to answer "Amen."

Shanah Tovah! A good year to all! May 5773 usher in an abundance of new blessings for you, for our community, and for the world. -- *Rabbi Debra Orenstein*

- Add meaning with the traditional (not just with the innovative)
 - Gomel blessings for the entire community

It was very powerful to ask people to stand during the morning Torah reading on Yom Kippur, if they felt they had been spared in the prior year. The sheer number of people standing was a testament both to the fragility of life and to the immense grace we so commonly receive – and discount. People didn't have to share their stories in advance with me in order to participate in the blessing, but those who did had an ally and a witness in me, as someone who knew all the details. I connected deeply with many people simply by asking what my congregants had narrowly missed or been spared. Sample Bulletin Announcement: "GRATEFUL FOR BEING SPARED? During High Holiday services, Rabbi Orenstein will share the *Gomel* blessing, a prayer for coming through a dangerous passage – traditionally, travel across an ocean, an accident or near-accident, childbirth, major surgery, or the like – in safety. If you have had an experience during the past year in which you escaped harm, or were spared even more serious harm than might have occurred, please contact the rabbi at (201) 265-2272 or rabbi@bisrael.com. Everything you share is confidential. People can be included in the blessing by name or completely anonymously."

Those reciting the blessing say:

*Baruch ata adonai eloheynu melech ha'olam,
ha-gomel lachayaveem tovot, shehg'malanee kol tov.*

Blessed are You, Adonai, Sovereign of all time and space,
Who graciously bestows favor even when we haven't "earned" grace,
and Who has been gracious to me.

The congregation responds:

Mee shehg'malchem kol tov, hoo yigmalchem kol tov, selah!

May the One who has been good and gracious to you this time,
be good and gracious to you at all times. Amen!

- Capitalize on silent and private times during public prayer, especially the Amidah.

- Increase the *kavannah* by slowing the pace.
 - An anecdote: My cousin is a niece and cousin to rabbis, and she lived in Israel for 8 years. She has even led High Holiday services as a *kol bo*. When I asked her what her new rabbi spoke about over the High Holidays, she said that she couldn't remember exactly what he said, but she really liked him, because he said the Mourner's Kaddish slowly, so everyone could follow.
 - During the Shema and the unique baruch shem on yom kippur, add a few seconds for the words to enter people's hearts before the Ve'ahavta.
 - Pause after each sin listed in the Al Chet, and invite people to contemplate how they may have participated in or tolerated or helped to heal that sin in the past year.
 - After the traditional Avinu Malkeynu, chant just the first two words and leave a silence in which person can fill in their own *bakashot* silently.
 - In your own speaking, allow time for ideas to sink in.
 - If you ask a question (even a rhetorical one), pause to give people a chance to think and consider.
 - Of course, per my cousin Helene, don't rush the mourner's kaddish.
 - Slowing the pace in these ways does not add very much time to the service, but it gives sense of spaciousness. It sends the message: Time is not scarce. There is room to breathe. This is not a race. Cumulatively, all these extra pauses might add 1-7 minutes to a service. It's a worthwhile trade-off!
- Institute Orenstein's Rosh Hashanah Torah Reading for Disconnected Jews
 - Based on Ezra's practice in Neh. 8:1-12 and Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's contemporary example.
 - Translate and add commentary in the trope as you read.
- What is your larger purpose?
 - How can choir, cantor, handouts, Hebrew school, help?

"Thank God, I Can Sin"
About Nathan's. My DAD. Read that section.

Structural (a.k.a. bigger) innovations

- Whenever proposing innovations, especially larger ones, use the term EXPERIMENT. It is much easier to accept change, when it is offered as an experiment, rather than a new regime. This leaves you room to fail, too. It was an experiment; it didn't work; we move on.
- Second day of Rosh Hashanah can be cultivated as a proving ground for new ideas, a time dedicated to experimentation
- Guided meditations in lieu of or to complement a sermon

- I used a version of the following Guided Meditation for Erev Rosh Hashanah for many years:
 - Text study & discussion in lieu of a sermon
 - Clergy in conversation in lieu of a sermon
 - Two rabbis or a rabbi and cantor take turns teaching a text and then commenting on one another's teachings. I did this with Mordecai Finley in Los Angeles, with truly memorable and live, unscripted results.
 - Story & discussion in lieu of a sermon
 - It's helpful to provide discussion questions and ideally small group discussion leaders, to ease people into the new habit of talking *about* the sermon or story, and not just *during* it. ☺
 - I have drawn from Hasidic stories, Jewish story collections, and secular literature.
 - One year, I took Nachman of Bratslav as the theme and "through line" for all my High Holiday sermons. Over the course of High Holidays, I spoke on his biography, the theme of "never give up," and the theme of "joy." On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I told a Nachman story instead of delivering a sermon. I used the Joel ben Izzy version as my primary inspiration, but adapted it. Here are my notes and questions for it:

NOTES for Treasure Story:

Small town just outside Krakow

Tailor named Ya'akov ben Yekel

No matter how hard he worked, could seem to earn enough money to feed wife and children. His house was falling apart. Small. Without heat. Unfurnished. His children – the children of a tailor, mind you – wore hand-me-downs.

Not only didn't they have new clothes. They couldn't afford books or teachers. In those days, families hired teachers. There were no public schools, and Yakov couldn't afford to educate his children the way they deserved.

So went to Temple, prayed in front of the open ark for a miracle. Your name is El Shaddai. We put a shin on the mezuzah, for shaddai. Means the God of enough. Please give me enough. And if you give me MORE than enough, I promise to use every penny wisely.

That night, he had a dream.

Dreamed of the distant city of Prague.

Saw it clearly. Saw buildings, bridges. One, large, beautiful STONE bridge. Drawn to it. Had a shovel, began to dig. As he started to dig, a voice came. "Yakov Ben Yekel, go to Prague, there is treasure there for you."

Hopeful. Dismissed. How could he get to Prague. Next three nights.

Set off for Prague.

Just in case, there was something to this dream, he carried a small shovel he carried in a satchel. Took him weeks to get there. Stunned to see, a city that exactly matched his dreams. He walked around, knew its streets as if he had lived there his whole life.

Drawn to beautiful Stone bridge.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Guard loomed over him. “What are you doing here?”

He recognized in that question, the same question God has asked Elijah – mah lecha pho. Same question Jews asked themselves every High Holidays. Why am I here?

He understood guard not talking about meaning of life. Or about finding his purpose.

He wanted to know – what the heck are you doing? Why are you digging near a stone bridge? And he didn't look very pleased.

Not knowing what else to say. Told the truth – I had a persistent dream that led me to come here, and so I am digging.

Slapped his face. You look like a dreamer. Thin. Sickly. Weak.

When you are strong, you don't listen to dreams. You look at reality.

Reality is: this is a public bridge, and I am a guard, and it's time for you to go.

As if that weren't enough, guard continued to insult Yaakov. Dreams! Everyone with any sense knows that dreams are **garbage of the mind**. Last night I had a dream. About some Jew, a tailor, lived in a tiny town somewhere in Poland. In my dream, I heard my name called. Ivan. In the house of this Jew, Yankel or Yekkel, or some such crazy name, there is a stove, and under the stove is a pot of gold. You don't see me running off to Poland with a shovel. Dreams are for fools.

With that, he gave Yakov a shove and pushed him away roughly from the bridge.

But Yakov didn't mind, because he realized that Ivan's dream was about him.

He set off for home. Took him weeks. Had to walk through rain and snow. Suffer hunger on the way, but he had hope. He had two dreams on his side. The first thing he did when he walked in the door was hug his family. They, after all, were his REAL treasure.

Then, he went to the stove. It was large and heavy an old fashioned stove that took up most of the kitchen and burnt firewood. . It had been there since his family moved in. With great labor, he moved it to the side, and began to dig underneath it.

Dug for hours, and found nothing. Exhausted from his journey and from his disappointment, he fell asleep.

This time, he was too tired to dream.

But as he slept, his children played in the hole he had dug. They dug out mud with cups and spoons and played games and made mud cakes. Until youngest child, a girl, pushed her spoon down in the dirt and heard the clink of metal. With the help of her brothers and sisters, she pulled out what looked like a soup pot, but none of the children could open it. Brought it to their father... he pried it open. Lo and behold, it was a pot full of gold coins. inside were gold coins.

It was a fortune. There was treasure enough to support his family for years. He could hire the finest teachers for his children, fix furnish his home, buy enough food not just for shabbos but for the weekdays, too. He could purchase the finest silks and wools to make his wife a beautiful new wardrobe. Best of all, he could finally do what he had always wanted to do, and never been able to do until now: he could help the poor.

Yaakov lived a good life. He provided for his family. He helped many poor people.

But the pot was, after all, not a bank vault – it was just big enough for soup. He spent his fortune coin by coin. As storehouse diminished, temptation to hoard. But Ya'akov trusted God. If God had a plan that would lead him to Prague so he could find what was right under his feet, then surely God could help him anywhere, anytime. Meanwhile, Ya'akov did his part. He still earned a living as a tailor. Not much of a living – but something. So a great many coins went out, but a few coins also came in.

That's how it is: money comes, money goes. Eventually, Yaakov could see the bottom of the soup pot, and then he could count the remaining coins on one hand. He apportioned some for a pillow for his wife, so that she could have comfort and a little luxury. And he bought food enough to fill the pantry. He saved the last coin, to give to the poor. It was a special coin, being the last, and he wanted to spend it wisely.

Yakaov ven Yekel went for a walk in the forest to clear his head. He prayed to God. God, my children are beyond school age now. I thank you for giving me money enough to hire their Hebrew teachers and educate them in the way of our tradition. This was something I never had, and it give me great joy to give it to them. Now, I just need to get the boys and girls married off, and to take care of my wife. We can go back to surviving on less. Lord, please just give us enough to eat. Find a way. A dream from your grace. A dress to sew for a customer. Your will be done. And then he remembered something he had overheard the tutors teaching once, a mishnah from Pirkie Avot. Aseh retzoncha kirtzono. Let my will be in aligned with your will God. In that moment, he was so happy, so thankful that some of his children's learning has come also to him.

Just then, he saw an old woman. She walked with a cane, stooped over. Yakov Yankel as a tailor knew fabric, could see she wore rags, rather than clothes. Made of a thin fabric, not warm enough to keep out the cold. With holes, yet. He approached her. Tante, he addressed her respectfully, please take this coin, you should live and be well.

Woman straightened up as much as her hunched back would allow. “How do you know, sir, that I am in need of charity.”

Yaakov felt terrible. He had embarrassed the poor woman. I didn't mean to insult you tante. I thought, every one can use a little extra blessing.

I don't need your tzedkakah, but I am prepared to offer you a transaction.

A transaction?

A deal. I will accept your coin – in exchange for some information.

Information?

Advice.

Very well, Said Yankel. Maybe this was a way for the old woman to save her dignity. To feel she had worked, and maybe after all her years on this earth, she HAD some wisdom to impart.

Yes, advice. Why not?

You have to take me seriously, said the old woman.

For you, Yakov, I have two words in exchange for that coin: DIG DEEPER.

Yakov wasted no time. Returned to the stove, found same hole - a small box. If he had not dug deep and had known he was looking for something, he NEVER would have found it. Filled with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. It was worth more money than all his children and future grandchildren could spend in their lifetimes.

Even had enough money to set up each of his children according to their wishes and talents. They became rabbis and business people. Some of the girls, now with large dowries, married great Torah scholars. Everyone was well-settled and happy. All of them, following their parents example, gave to the poor.

Ya'akov. He did something he always wanted to do, but never dreamed was possible: built a house of study at a place where two roads.

Hired finest teachers – this time for HIMSELF. For first time, he learned basic Judaism, and was able to dig into the debates of the Talmud and the mysteries of the Kabbalah.

At this school, beggars are never turned away without being given coins and food.

Anyone can come and study.

Area around Krakow is not the same as it used to be. Some people claim it still stands today.

There is a hotel outside Krakow with one of the finest Jewish libraries in Poland.

Jewish house of Study has become but Place for travelers to stop and rest, to think about where they have been and where they are going.

Over reception desk, hand-made sign. Perhaps it was made by Yaakov or one of his descendants.

[[Sometimes you must follow your dreams very far, to find that which is closest to your heart.]]

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WERE DISTRIBUTED AS PART OF THE HIGH HOLIDAY HANDOUT BOOKLET. WE TOOK TIME FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION FOLLOWING MY TELLING OF THE STORY:

BURIED TREASURE: Questions for Private Reflection

1. When in your life have you “received a holy message” whether from a dream, an intuition, a text, a friend, a teacher, or any other source?
2. What have been the consequences for you when you listened and when you didn't?

BURIED TREASURE: Questions for Communal Discussion

1. What treasure is close to home for you, which you may not have fully uncovered?
2. How might you dig deeper this year?
3. If you had all the money and treasure in the world, what would you use it for, and where would you find your motivation?

- A secular source of stories I recommend for High Holidays is Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams* (the Book of Life chapter is particularly wonderful to read aloud and discuss).
- Parables are wonderful in a way that is similar to stories.
Kafka Parable: I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stable. The servant did not understand me. I myself went to the stable [shades of Avraham and chamor], saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance, I heard the bugle [read: shofar] call. I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and

had heard nothing [lishmo kol shofar]. At the gate, he stopped me, asking, “where are you riding to, mater?” “I don’t know,” I said, “only away from here, away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination.” “So you know your destination?” he asked. “Yes,” I answered, “Didn’t I say so? Away-from-Here, that is my destination.” “You have no provisions with you,” he said. “I need one,” I said. “The journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don’t get anything on the way. No provisions can save me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.”

Commentary: Do you know where you are going? Is your destination defined in positive terms? Are you going to someplace, and not just away from here? Are you choosing a path, or just rebelling against someone else’s path? Maybe you are so focused on some particular destination that you’ve lost sight of the journey altogether.

What provisions do you take on this journey? Do you try to be tough and go it alone without any companionship, help or supplies? Do you say with a perverse pride – no provisions, no people can save me? Do you carry with you what you need or just what weighs you down? And what plans do you have for gathering strength along the way?

These are important questions, for life is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.

- (Assisted) bibliodrama in lieu of Torah commentary
 - For example, one year I prepared several very short scripts for several characters in the Jonah story, and having those scripts made people feel comfortable to participate. They didn’t *have* to extemporize, but some of them did. The contrast among the different scripts was striking enough to spark lots of discussion after the drama.
- Break-out sessions
 - Provide at least one traditional choice, to accommodate those who enjoy things the way they are.
- Lay contributions and commentary (vetted)
 - In my L.A. congregation, we had a tradition of congregants offering *divrei tefillah* (written by them) and poems (written by congregants or selected by clergy) before some prayers. It was difficult and important to vet those.
 - Here is a poem that I used last year before the Final Shofar blast at Neilah. I liked it so much, that I wanted to give it to folks as a take-away message about teshuvah. I printed enough copies for everyone on colored paper and ushers handed them out to folks as they exited for a Break-Fast.

5773 Neilah – Before the Final Shofar Blast

From William Stafford,
20th Poet Laureate of the United States

“You [Hearing] This, Be Ready”

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world

That the breathing respect that you carry
 Wherever you go right now?
 Are you waiting
 For time to show you some better thoughts?

When you **turn around**, starting here, lift this
 New glimpse that you found; carry into evening
 All that you want from this day. This interval you spent
 reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now,
 Starting here, right in this room, when you **turn around**.

- Yom Kippur Healing or Meditation Service
 - During the break, offer a meditation or healing service.
- Talking in shul: spiritual conversations
 - Provide questions based on a sermon or other teaching for people to discuss with a neighbor. This is a good “chatimah” to a sermon, but only if you can make the questions both engaging and non-threatening. Also, let folks know the time limit in advance, so they share accordingly, and so that the service isn’t lengthened unduly.
 - For example, I concluded a sermon entitled “Shana Tova – But How Do We Define a Good Year?” with the following questions: What is one thing that happened that made last year a good year? And what is one thing you can anticipate for the coming year that will make it a good year?
 - People will remember and assimilate what they said, in response to your prompt, more than what you said. It’s worth cutting down your remarks to make time for theirs.
 - Befoe Kol Nidrei, I ask people to turn to the folks around them and introduce themselves if they do not know one another. Then I add: “But if you happened to come with family or friends, if folks in the sanctuary are not only familiar, but close to you, then please take this opportunity to wish them a good year and to ask for forgiveness for anything you might have done to hurt them in the past year.” I acknowledge that not everything can be worked out in this brief encounter, and you may need to set a date to talk some things out, but we can all start the holiday with an intention of repentance and forgiveness.
 - I break the ice for this in a few ways:
 - I explain that this is a traditional custom.
 - I tell the story of my dad, who used to approach me each year by saying, “Debra, if I have done anything to hurt you in the past year, by word or by deed, deliberately or carelessly, I want you to know... you’re too sensitive.”
 - I invite people to get out of their seats. Movement helps. People sometimes approach one another and bridge physical as well as emotional distance.
 - This year, I intend to bill myself as “the only rabbi in America who is going to ask you to turn ON your cell phone tonight.” I will encourage people to power up their cell phones for the last

time before sunset and call someone to request or offer forgiveness. If there is someone with whom they have a serious conflict, they can say, “I am calling you from synagogues, and I know we can’t really talk now. But I want to say, I don’t want to go into this holiday without telling you I want to work this out, and I care about our relationship.” When the time elapses, I will remind everyone to turn off cell phones, and we will begin Kol Nidrei.

Sermons

- What is your larger purpose, and how can sermons work with other elements of the service to support it?
 - E.g., if your theme is Love the Stranger, how can that be reflected in ushering, Kol Nidrei appeal, songs chosen, prayer explanations, etc.
 - Can you get the Hebrew School involved in your theme (on years when the Holidays are not so “early”? Can you use some pieces that your choir already knows, or suggest a new piece? Can your High Holiday preparation class take a focus that supports your sermon themes?
- Consider balance
 - You may want to cover Israel & Diaspora, social & personal concerns, God, Torah, and Community, etc.
 - Even so, I advise making a theme, so that you give people a focus. Folks who come to one service are not lost. But folks who come to every service have the sense of going on a journey or having an extended conversation together.
 - E.g., Sermons on peace in Israel, peace in your home, inner peace, and making peace with God offer both “balance” and unity. Then the word SHALOM can be highlighted in prayers, colored by the Hebrew School, etc.
 - For a similar balance, you can take the theme of tikkun, rather than shalom. Then the focus becomes Tikkun atzmi, tikkun hamishpacha (Jonathan Rosov – “almost everyone I know has someone to whom they no longer speak”), tikkun ha’am, tikkun olam: what does God have to do with it? letaken olam bemalchut shadai.
 - The best High Holidays I have enjoyed to date was a year when I gave all seven major talks on different approaches to and aspects of Gratitude. I thought people would protest, but instead it became such a rich and layered experience, that folks were inspired to continue the theme throughout the year. My double CD set on Gratitude contains many of those sermons, plus other material on Gratitude.
 - Questions are highly effective in sermons. Here are a few I have used:
 - “Really Ask the Questions” is printed in *From Generation to Generation*, and it addresses the usually rhetorical questions: Who do you think you are? What do you expect? What business is it of yours?
 - I gave a sermon last year that was explicitly about the power of questions. A DRAFT follows.

Shana Tovah. /// A good and sweet year to you.

Over the course of the next ten days, I want to ask your support in keeping questions– The BIG questions of life – alive in our community. There are private questions that each of us must ask ourselves, and there are questions that will be better addressed, if we can explore them together. I want to remind one another to keep asking, keep reflecting, keep probing, and not settle for whatever answers may come first and easily.

On the face of it, this shouldn't be too hard. Jews love questions and questioning. The Talmud begins with a question – and rabbis discuss question after question for the next 2,710 pages. Within the first few chapters of the Torah, God and humanity are querying one another, and Cain even answers God's question with a question of his own.

By the way, do you know WHY Jews answer a question with a question?
Why not?

About ten years ago, Rabbi Alan Lew of blessed memory published an inspiring book about the High Holidays. I especially love the title. He called it: This is Real and You are Totally Unprepared. It's a daring message, and a little alarming. It might sound like that title was crafted by an evil genius on Madison Avenue, but the idea is actually well-grounded in tradition.

The Ancient Rabbis called Rosh Hashanah Yom Hadin – Judgment Day. They imagined the time leading up to and including the Ten Days of Awe as a test. The test questions are impossible to cram for, because there is a whole year's worth of material that must be covered. Slowly and deliberately, sometimes painfully, we must sift through the past year and then answer the test questions: how did I do, and how can I do better? We examine ourselves. We give an accounting of the soul.

So much of daily life is taken up with questions that are trivial or small –
Did you pick up the dry cleaning?
What's for dinner?
Where are my keys?
These questions will NOT be on the final exam.

A friend of mine going was going through a particularly difficult passage in his marriage. Thankfully, things are better for him and his wife now. But at that time, there was more tension than peace in their house. He came to me for some advice. "I feel," he said, "like marriage consists of two questions, asked over and over again,"
Whose turn is it? AND
Whose fault is it?

Single or married, we have all asked those questions at one time or another.
But this time of year, we seek to open our minds and hearts wider. We ask the big questions, the Judgment Day questions:
What is our true purpose? Where does meaning lie – what does life hold for us beyond just getting up and going to work, completing tasks, taking turns, and assigning blame to the other guy.

In the words of the liturgy, "Ma anachnu, meh chayyenu? What are we? What are our lives?"

If we can stop ///to THINK and REFLECT/// at this time of year, we realize that we have a great many important questions, which have been neglected:
questions to wrestle with ourselves,
questions to delve into with loved ones,

questions to bring to God.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “It is not enough for me to ask questions; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: What am I here for?”

Tonight, I want to follow Heschel’s example, and discuss a question that is closely related to his. It’s a question posed in the First Book of Kings. So please don’t take this as rudeness on my part. I am just quoting from the Bible when I ask you tonight: “What are you doing here?”

This is the question that God asks Elijah the prophet. Like a lot of Jewish questions, it comes with a story.

The story starts in I Kings 18, when Elijah faces off against the prophets of the Baal, a god in Phoenician idolatry. These prophets have recently killed scores of Israelite prophets. Elijah survived. He proposes a competition with the prophets of Baal to see whose God has power. It’s 450 to 1. Elijah alone stands for one God, and 450 prophets stand for Baal – along with Asherah, and the other gods in the pantheon. The contest is meant to sway the Israelites. They have gone astray, worshipping idols.

In the sacrificial system of worship, a burning altar is a sign of God’s acceptance. No matter what they do or how loudly they wail their prayers to Baal, not one of the 450 false prophets can ignite the offering to Baal. Finally, it is time for the evening sacrifice and Elijah’s attempt. Elijah soaks the bull on his altar in water, and then he soaks the wood. He floods the stones beneath the wood. Three times, he orders that water be poured into a moat around the altar. At last, he cries out to God “Adonai God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Answer me, Answer me, That this people may know that YOU are God, and can turn their hearts around.” With those words, the fire of God falls upon the altar and consumes the burnt offering, and then the wood underneath it, and also the stones under the wood. The fire licks up the water in the moat around the base of the altar.

This visible sign of God’s power is so impressive that the Israelites, who have been practicing the worship of Baal, fall on their faces and cry out: Adonai Hu Ha’elohim. Adonai hu ha’elohim. Adonai is indeed God. These are the very words WE say each year at the end of Yom Kippur. Power does not lie with Baal – or with money, power, fame, popularity, achievement, or any other idol. Adonai is God.

This contest was a triumph for Elijah and his prophecy, and in his moment of victory, he marshaled the help of the Israelites to exact vengeance. He killed the false prophets, who had killed the Israelite leaders. Jezebel, the famous Phoenician Princess, had married into the Israelite Kingdom. As Queen, she persuaded her husband, King Ahav of Israel, to allow the worship of foreign gods. When Elijah disgraced and destroyed the prophets of Baal, it was an affront to Jezebel, and she put out the order to have him killed.

So Elijah fled, all the way from the North of Israel to the Sinai desert. There he tells God, “Take my life, for I have not succeeded any better than those who came before me.” Maybe he was exhausted from his long struggle against idolatry. Maybe he preferred to die at God’s hand than at Jezebel’s. Maybe he didn’t have faith that the turn-around among the Jews would last. What if they forgot the latest miracle and went back to worshipping false gods, just as they did so many times before – and since?

Elijah lays down under a small desert tree, seeking shade, sleep, oblivion. He asks God to let him die. Instead, God sends an angel – I call it the Jewish mother angel, because this angel says to Elijah, kum, echol. Get up and eat. After he complies, Elijah lays down again, too depressed to do anything but sleep. Again the angel touches him and says: Kum, echol. This time, adding, ki rav mimchah hadarech. This journey is too much for you.

On the strength of those two meals and that sympathy, Elijah ascends Mt. Sinai. He finds the same cleft in the Rock where Moses stood and saw God’s back.

Elijah is angry. He is sick of speaking God's truth to fickle people who can't decide whether to follow Righteousness or just Whatever Feels Right at the Moment. Even his greatest moment of success is marred by pain, doubt, and violence. He feels let down after what should have been a great triumph.

And that's when God asks: Ma Lecha Pho, Eliyahu
What are you doing here Elijah?

Elijah is at the lowest point in his life. He has lost the will to go on. But God doesn't comfort Elijah with sweet words or satisfy his sense of injustice with explanations. God doesn't give Elijah an answer. God gives Elijah a question. And it's a confrontational one at that.
Mah lecha pho, Eliyahu What are you doing here, Elijah?

In other words, You're in the wrong spot, Elijah. Go be with the people you are meant to help, even if they frustrate you! Even if it's hard! Even if you don't yet see lasting results.

And God says the same to us: Share your gifts, fulfill your mission. Don't hide where it's safe. Go where you can make a contribution. Go be with people you can help and serve.

Elijah answers God as follows:

I have been zealous for Adonai, the God of hosts, for the Children of Israel have forsaken your covenant. They have torn down your altars and they have killed your prophets by the sword, and I alone remain, and they seek to take my life.

Just like Elijah, every human being can point to injustice. We can all testify that there were times when we tried hard, did the right thing, and seemed to pay a price for it, while others who did wrong skated by.

God answers Elijah's complaint, saying,
"Stand on the mountain before Me."

And Behold, -- the Bible tells us -- God passes by, and a great and strong wind splits mountains and shatters boulders before God, but God was not in the wind.

And after the wind -- an earthquake -- but God was not in the earthquake.

And after the earthquake a fire.
But God was not in the fire.

And after the fire, a still small voice. Kol demamah dakah.

And as Elijah understood, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, and behold a voice came to him again and said,

Mah lecha pho, eliyahu? What are you doing here, Elijah?

[The same exact question.]

And Elijah gives the exact same answer.

I have been zealous for Adonai, the God of hosts, for the Children of Israel have forsaken your covenant. They have torn down your altars and they have killed your prophets by the sword, and I alone remain, and they seek to take my life. ///

We are a LOT like the Children of Israel, We are more fickle than firm in our spiritual beliefs. We are easily seduced by what seems easy. We treat ultimate values like commodities, and commodities like ultimate values.

But that's another sermon.

This sermon is about how much we resemble Elijah. We run away from our purpose and mission. At times, we become sick and tired of trying to make a contribution and start to wonder whether we are really meant to make one at all.

Just like Elijah, we have traveled to meet God in a sacred space for a variety of reasons and motivations:
– call them good, call them bad, call them human.

We may have come for spiritual refuge and sustenance

Or just to hide out from the work that we need to do.

We come to seek out inspiration

And also to unload our despair.

We come because we have failed this year,

And because we feel alone.

We come because we have triumphed this year, too,

And it has left us wondering whether this is all there is.

WE are Elijah.

And just like Elijah, when we approach God on holy days and in holy places, we come to find that God is not in the majesty of the bimah or the mountain

God is not in the power of the earthquake – and not even in the cantor's beautiful chanting

God is in the still small voice.

As the Unetaneh Tokef prayer states:

Beshofar gadol yitakah, vekol demamah dakah yishamah.

The great shofar is sounded, and a still small voice is heard.

More than that:

When the great shofar is sounded, it is only as a signal that the still small voice is crying out to be heard.

In his two answers to God, Elijah's words stay the same, but the music is different, the tone is different. Elijah's words repeat, but the messages are polar opposites.

This first version says: I WANT to do the right thing. Other people are against what is fair and right. They are messed up! No one is supporting me – just God. I have so much to do. I am the ONLY onewhom people depend to do this body of spiritual work in the world. SO MUCH is asked of me.

The second version says:

I WANT [deeply want] to do the right thing. Other people are against what is fair and right. [with sympathy] They are messed up! No one is supporting me- just God. [excitement] I have so much to do. I am the only one whom people depend on to do this body of spiritual work in the world. So much is asked of me.

The first variation says: Poor me. Look how much have to do.

The second variation says: Lucky me. Look how much I get to do.

Before he hears the still small voice: Elijah asks: why me? Why do I have to do all the work?

After he hears the still small voice, Elijah can say: why not me? Why shouldn't I be the one to repair the world?

Some of you may be skeptical about these differences I am finding. [[[Rabbi, nice interpretation, but aren't you just making this up?]]]

But I am not just doing a dramatic reading.

I KNOW the tone and the meaning are different **once Elijah hears the still small voice**, because the results are different.

The first time Elijah speaks, he stays holed up in his cave.

The second time Elijah utters his speech, he comes out of the cleft in the rock and down off the mountain. He resumes the journey that had seemed too much for him.

He goes back and prophesies.

He helps people he is frustrated with.

He faces his fears and his enemies. He puts his life to use again.

The Jewish mother angel said to Elijah, Rav Lecha. It's too much for you. But Rav Lecha can also be translated rav- it's expansive; lecha - and it's just for you. Each of us has a demanding, expansive journey – tailor made for us. Elijah knew his mission, even when he rebelled against it.

What are YOU doing here?

IN about 10 days at the end of YK, we are going to come out of the cleft in the Rock, out of the cocoon of communion and community.

And Guess what?

When we emerge, the world won't have changed much – not since before HH, and not even since Elijah's day.

The Jezebels will still be gunning for the good guys

People we hope will listen to us and support us, will let us down

Even our biggest successes won't solve all our problems.

But it doesn't matter that the world won't have changed.

Because YOU will have had the opportunity to change.

Here in the cleft of the Rock, you will begin to focus less on Why me?

And more on Why NOT me?

Why shouldn't I forgive first?

Why not give more?

Why NOT make a change?

Why not make the difference?

It would be nice to experience BIG changes, sudden shifts, dramatic improvements.

It would be miraculous if our habits could be blown away as if with a gale force wind,

and our ruts could be broken up by a sudden, stirring, quaking beneath our feet.

It would be a Divine sign and omen if all the anger and grudges of our hearts were incinerated by the sound of the shofar blast.

But god is not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire.

God is in the still small voice - the quiet, unassuming, even meek Presence that is with us at all times.

And if we can just listen deeply, we will start to hear that we are not just purveyors of questions and complaints. In the memorable words of Victor Frankel, “we are being questioned by Life”– If we can just listen to that still small voice, we will start to hear Life’s demands and queries. We will remember, mah lecha pho, why we are here.

This kind of inquiry doesn’t involve any impressive pyrotechnics – it’s quiet, almost silent – kol demamah dakah. But deeply listening and responding is the ONLY way I know that we humans can reliably generate miracles. ///

Think about what transpires over these High Holdiays. From the vantage point of a fly on the wall, not much.

People sit in a room. Sometimes they stand.

People chant words. Sometimes they are quiet.

But when you emerge from this space, this cleft in the Rock, you can be utterly transformed. I have SEEN it. Some of you have lived it.

Everything changes, when you REMEMBER why you are here.

Every challenge becomes bearable, even exciting.

Rosh Hashanah is Yom Hadin – Judgement Day.

This year, may each of us be proved and improved by the great questions of life.

Rosh Hashanah is also called Yom Hazikaron – the day of remembrance.

May each of us listen closely to the inner Voice that reminds us why we are here.

FINAL BENEDICTION

Rabbis around the country are giving final benedictions tonight. But in light of my theme earlier, I want, instead, to offer you a final exam.

Here are the questions for Erev Rosh Hashanah:

Question # 1. Have you begun asking the big questions?

2. When can you devote some time this holiday to sitting in silence and listening for the still small voice?
3. What is Life asking of you?
4. Why are you here?

That is a lot to think about, but it’s important also to review the grading system. It may be different that what you are used to.

--If you share your answers with another student of Life – that is not considered cheating. In fact, you get extra credit.

-- The High Holidays are a multi-day recertification exam for renewal of your Book of Life license. As such, you will need to make sure you get lots of nourishment, whether from motherly angels, wise children, or honey cake.

-- Please don’t be nervous. There is really only one way to fail, and that is if you fail to emerge from your cave.

-- Lastly, this is a take-home exam. So please don’t leave these questions in shul. Take all the High Holiday questions home with you.

May 5773 be a year of curiosity and inquiry.

May we ask wisely. Listen deeply. And respond thoughtfully. Amen

SAMPLE HANDOUT – GIVEN AT CLOSE OF EREV ROSH HASHANAH AS PEOPLE EXITED, FOLLOWING THE SERMON, as a reinforcement and literal *take-home* exam.

Final Exam, in lieu of Final Benediction.

Questions:

1. Have you begun asking the big questions?
2. When can you devote some time this holiday to sitting in silence and listening for the still small voice?
3. What is Life asking of you?
4. Why are you here?

That is a lot to think about, but it's important also to review the grading system. It may be different than what you are used to.

Directions and Answer Key:

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-- Lastly, this is a take-home exam. So please don't leave the questions in shul. Take all the High Holiday questions home with you.

May this be a year of curiosity and inquiry.

May we ask wisely, listen deeply, and respond thoughtfully. Amen.

- “By virtue of what have you lengthened your days?” --Megillah 27b (question posed to Rabbi Zakkai and other sages; answered with rigor: “miyamai lo ...”) inspired a sermon entitled “Life in Your Years” which appears on my CD Awe Always. A rough draft, written for Kol Nidrei, follows below. Remember please that this is a DRAFT, full of imperfections. The CD has a more polished version, but doesn’t include the song or guided meditation:

We have been preparing for this night for a long time.

Our Shofar Corps blew shofar during Elul, in the month leading up to High Holidays, sounding a call for repentance and return.

Our choir has been in rehearsals since June, reviewing the words and the melodies over and over again: the book of life, shana tova, avinu malkeynu.

Volunteers have been staffing their phones at home and the tables outside, making plans for our healing service tomorrow, beautifying this sanctuary, preparing to greet you at the door.

The Jewish communal calendar has had us in **long-term** training for this day.

There is a count-down from Tisha B’av, exactly two months ago, to today.

Tisha B’av commemorates the destruction of the Holy Temples and Jewish suffering, in general.

It ushers in the Season when we consider

what is beyond our control, and what is within our control.

What are we doing to destroy the world,

and what are we doing to repair it?

In one midrashic counting, **the first day of Elul, 40 days ago**, marks the breach of trust when we worshipped the Golden Calf and Moses smashed the first set of tablets. Tonight, is the anniversary of starting over, of that second chance when Moses could receive the second set of tablets.

Weeks//, months//, millennia of preparation went into this service.

So why do I feel that the High Holidays snuck up on me this year? ////

The years go by more quickly as we get older. (A decade is half your life when you're twenty, but less than 17% when you're sixty.)

The good part is: you can say "we've been friends for 25 years" about a lot more folks, as you age.

The bad part is: you look up and say, "Yom Kippur –again? already?"

This year, many blessings have kept me especially busy, with time seeming to fly by.

Makom had its major fundraiser just a month before High Holidays;

I wrote a meditation for each day of Elul;

several members of the community had special needs at this time of year.

Like all congregational rabbis, I try to prepare not just for myself or my remarks during the High Holiday season, but for the community, too.///

I hold you all in prayer. That takes time – and focus.

And, of course, I have two beautiful babies, who like to pass colds between them. In a possibly related development, last week– together with much of the rest of Los Angeles - I got the flu. I had been taking care of kids most of the night., I had laryngitis, and I looked and sounded pathetic. In the morning, I gazed lovingly at my wonderful husband and made what seemed like a perfectly reasonable request. I croaked to him: "I'm not going to make it. Can you just give me one **extra week** between now and Yom Kippur?"

I don't ask for much. Just change the calendar.

How is it, that after all the calendrical warnings—

the torah portions that announce High Holidays are coming,

the shofar blasts sounding a wake-up call throughout Elul,

Rosh Hashanah itself,

the ten days of repentance –

we can come to Yom Kippur and still want "just a little more time."

The truth is: we **had** more time. We devote fully 1/6 of our year to setting intentions for how we will live the remaining 5/6ths of the time.

Historically, we have more time than ever before, in that we live longer than ever.

40 was a ripe old age, when rabbi Akiva took on Torah study at age 40.

There are more years in the average life today, but is there more life in our years?

That is my theme and my refrain for tonight: How shall we add more life to our years?

I remember an old joke by Tom Lehrer:

He said, “By the time Mozart was my age////, he’d been dead for three years.”

[[[Yom Kippur is in some ways, a rehearsal of death. We dress in a kittle—these white robes are also shrouds. We don’t take food or water, as corpses don’t need them. We live as pure souls for a day]]]

We don’t want to come to the end of life and say, “give me a little more time.” I just now figured it out. I wasn’t paying attention before. NOW, I know I can accomplish what I’m meant to do -- with one more day, one more week, one more Yom Kippur.

My grandmother Mathilda lived into her 90’s. She was thoroughly engaged in life until the very end. In fact, she went into work every day at the store she founded until age 83. When she stopped going to the store regularly, at age 87, she asked me if I wanted to know the secret to living long. I listened eagerly. She said, “say a lot of unetaneh tokefs.” And my other grandmother Libby, also alive at the time, added: “eat a lot of afikomens.”

[[[In other words, survive a lot of High Holidays when the Unetaneh Tokef prayer is spoken, Celebrate many Passovers, when the afikomen is eaten. Enjoy the gift of a Holiday fruitcake every year for 100 years, and you, too, can live a long life.]]]

My grandmothers had great senses of humor, but they were also conveying a serious message. Though each of them lived to ripe old age, they had no magic elixir of youth. But they did know that you have to appreciate each year, each High Holiday season, each passage, each **moment** as it comes.

There are several ongoing studies of centenarians – people who live to be over 100. Diet is a factor, as case studies from Okinawa attest. Some kind of exercise – no regimen, necessarily, but simply moving - is important. And genes play a role, too. – about 30% of the contributing factors to living to 100 are, apparently, in the genes. But the biggest factors are states of mind, states of mind which science is finding can actually affect your genes: optimism, flexibility, adaptability to loss, forgiveness, social connections, religious affiliation, adhering to deeply-held values. These are common factors, and even predictors, of long life.

The following is a summary of the results of centenarians studied at the University of Georgia. **[and here I quote]**

These centenarians know the difference between aging and becoming old.

Becoming old means:

- losing interest in life
- accepting the notion that it's too late to change
- believing that life doesn't matter anymore
- failing to set goals and commitments
- losing a sense of surprise and giving in to boredom **[unquote]**

When you add life to your years, no matter how old you are,

you are interested in life

you know that it's never too late to change.

You believe that life matters

You set goals and commitments

You maintain your ability to be surprised and interested.

In the Talmud, several elders, all students of Rabi Zachai, are asked about their secret of longevity.

And the phrasing is significant:

Bameh he'erachtem yamim? How did you lengthen your days?

Not just how do you add more days to your life,

or time in your day,

but how do you add blessing and meaning.

How do you age, not just in time, but in wisdom?

How do you end the popular obsession with efficiency,

And enter a world of sufficiency.

Where you create a sense of expansiveness and wholeness?

To use Reb Zalman's phrasing—how do you go from aging to saging?////

On a daily basis, time is a great equalizer. We all have 24 hours in a day.

There are days where I feel a lot, connect a lot, learn a lot, accomplish a lot.

There are extraordinary days, where time seems to slow –or stretch out before me-- , and I can live and learn and experience enough to create memories that will last a lifetime.

And there are days when I say to myself, “where did the day go?”

Bameh Ne'erach yameynu: how can we lengthen our days?

One of the Sages who was asked about the length of his days, considered it an impertinent question:

Katz-tah becha-yay? “Do you think I should have lived shorter?” he asked.

And one of the students answered.

Rabi: Torah hi, ulilmod ani tzarich.

“My teacher, this is Torah, and I need to learn it.”

If we learn nothing else new this year, but only to lengthen our days, we will have learned major Torah.

Different sages had different approaches about how to lengthen one's days, and I want to share a few of their responses with you now. These answers are not tips and techniques for getting more done in a 24 hour period. It's not about multi-tasking or delegating or any other time-management tool. It's Torah – holy teaching – about how to live – both long and well. ///

When asked by his disciples, “how did you lengthen your days?” Rabbi Zaccai answered, in part,
Miyamai lo bitalti Kiddush hayom

Never in my days, did I fail to perform the sanctification of Shabbat through the blessing over the wine.”

Rabbi Zaccai lengthened his days through Shabbat, through the sanctification of time.

It's an ancient concept.

We've certainly heard it before. But have we enacted it??

Do we, by the way we make Shabbat different from the rest of the week, lengthen our days?

In our culture, it is so hard to unplug from technology,
to unhook ourselves from work,
from advertising and commerce and materialism.

Shabbat is an antidote, a pause, a healing balm, an island of peace.

On Shabbat, time stretches out before us, for enjoyment (oneg Shabbat), for learning, for connection to family & friends—and to God and to oneself.

[[Study out centenarians out of Loma Linda—

7th day Adventist study in Loma Linda—

Long life attributed to abstaining from coffee and liquor, but the other factor is: they have a shabbes. I believe Sabbath rest does – both literally and figuratively – add to your days.]]

Sometimes when rabbis talk about Shabbat, the message is full of poetry and inspiration, but it's vague.

I love Rabbi Zaccai's response because it is so specific.

Miyamai lo bitalti kiddish hayom. "Say the Kiddush every single week."

What if, every week in 5767, you ushered in the Sabbath with candles and wine

without forgetting

without exception

regardless of convenience or work schedule or day light savings time or who was in town or any external circumstance.

What transformation would be effected by that consistency and commitment

By your awareness of time and the measurement & closure of your week?

I can tell you from experience that folks who take on a Shabbat observance with this kind of rigor

Develop a whole new relationship to the words they recite

Deepen their relationship with God and with themselves

Change their connection to time itself

Rejuvenate and relax and renew on a whole new level.

(And, there is a corollary to Rabbi Zaccai's words. Instead of reliably adding something like the Kiddush blessing over wine to your Shabbat observance, you can consistently take something away.

In my own experience of Shabbat and in working with Jews and converts to Judaism, I have found the two most powerful commandments of restraint on Shabbat are:

Stop working & stop using money on Shabbat.

You don't know how much work and commerce constrict you, until **you** start restricting **them**.

No one says shopping and errands and catching up on work are more important than family or friends or culture or learning, but how do we spend the length of our weekend days?

No work? No spending money for any purpose whatsoever?

What may initially sound like a drastic constraint turns out to be an enormous source of Freedom

Reb Zalman will be speaking more on Shabbat tomorrow—on the poetry of it, and the specificity of its gifts and observances. For tonight, it's a lot just to say:

Miyamai lo bitalti Kiddush hayom –

Let's never give up on the sanctification of the day – whatever form that takes.

To lengthen our days, let's seriously consider how to celebrate the Sabbath, how we each might crown the week with a day of holy rest. ///

Another teaching –especially relevant to these High Holidays -- is offered by Rabbi Nechunia Ben Hakanah, who is likewise asked by his students—bameh he'erachta yamim? How did you lengthen your days?

And he answered, in part:

Me'yamay lo alta al mitati, kee-le-lat chaveri.

Never in all my days did I take the curse of my friend up on the bed with me. Meaning, I never went to bed angry, and I never gave others cause to go to bed with a grudge against me.

And to illustrate this principle, the Talmud gives the example of Mar Zutra, who used to say on his bed nightly, just as we recited at the start of the service: “I forgive all who have hurt me.”

Imagine how much room we free up in our minds and hearts,
when we really let go of the need to be right – and, worse still, of the need for others to be wrong.

It literally does lengthen your life to let go of anger—the Stanford Forgiveness study has proof from the social sciences.

But long before Stanford,
long before even the great Yeshivah at Yavneh,
our tradition taught that forgiveness increases the quality of your life.

It makes you sleep peaceful, and your days long. ///

You know the old saying: two Jews, three opinions. Over the course of a few Talmudic pages,
Seven rabbis answer the question: How have you lengthened your days.
Among them, they give 28 opinions – literally, I counted.

The number 28 amounts in gematria to “koach” –strength. Live this Torah, as they did, and you will not just live long, you will live strong – you will live expansive and powerful days.

Both the content and the variety of the teachings are impressive. Here is a sample:

How did I lengthen my days?

Never in all my days did I push someone out of the way to get ahead.
Never in all my days did I seek respect through the degradation of another.

Never in all my days did I call anyone by a demeaning nick-name.

Never in all my days did I insist on an honor or an apology that were due me.

Never in all my days have I focused on the wicked.

Never in all my days have I been harsh with members of my household when they didn't do what I wanted.

Never have I inserted myself ahead of someone more qualified or worthy.

Never in all my days have I rejoiced in the downfall of a fellow human being.

Never in all my days did I allow anyone to get to the House of Study ahead of me (I was always the first to arrive and learn), and never did I recite a blessing in the presence of someone more qualified than I.

Never in all my days did I disrespect a synagogue.

The next one you can take geographically or symbolically:

Never in my life did I take a synagogue as a short-cut, running through it on my way to somewhere else.

There is one teaching that three different rabbis offer:

They say:

And—I am not making this up – Talmud Megillah 28b—

Never have I slept in the house of study -- either a long or a short nap.

Seven rabbis express 28 ways to lengthen your days—

From Shabbat to forgiveness

From humility //to harmony at home

From respecting the synagogue to focusing on the good

So many ways to expand, to grow, to stretch –

And to fill our days with meaning.

The elders questioned have disparate opinions, but there is one thing all seven of them share in common.

They were rigorous.

Each of them begins his answer with the formula:

Meyamay lo—In all my days, I **never**.

Kol Nidrei is not the time for weak vows.

I'll try not to.

Or, **Maybe** I'll do less of that what isn't serving me.

Or, if I can, then sure, I'll contribute; but don't count on me.

If we dare to take a vow on this night of nullification of vows, then let it be sure and firm and clear.

Like the Rabbis of old, let's set firm boundaries,

so that as the blessing says, "your now is a real no, and your yes becomes a real yes."

It's only when your no **is** a real no that your yes **can be** a real yes.

When we have clear principles,

And carry them out consistently,

That gives us length of days – however long we live.

In discussing the Rabbis of the Talmud, I am not talking about a historical question or a rhetorical one—
but a genuine query of the living tradition. **How can we add life and length to our days?**

I want to ask you now to answer this question for yourself:

Bameh he'erachta yamim.

Think back to a day this past year that had the length of days in it.

Might have been a lifecycle event—wedding or funeral, where time slowed down and simultaneously whizzed by, and you really **felt** the day, experienced it deeply.

First day of vacation, where you could really relax. Breathe. Enjoy nature and your companions.

Or maybe it was that day before vacation, when you are rushed and pressed but somehow time expands—and you seem to get so much done, to magically clear the decks, and there is an enormous satisfaction in accomplishment.

What milestone, what conversation, what event, what accomplishment triggered for you a length of days experience?

Notice whatever first comes to mind.

See yourself in that place you were, in that circumstance.

Watch yourself, as if in a movie, and get curious

How were you feeling?

How were you treating others?

Where was community for you then?

What were you paying attention to?

Were you in the moment?

Were you beyond it?

Where was God for you in that lengthened day?

If you were to try to recreate that length of days feeling,

What elements are vital for you?

[[Family? Music? Connection? Integrity?]]

What has to be present for you, for it to be length of days

If you were to live according to your “length of days” occasion, what rule would you write:

In all my days, I never

In all my days, I always

///Lead out of meditation...

find yourself right here right now, in the seat where you are:

///To come out of the guided meditation, we sing “Limnot Yameynu” Teach Us to Treasure Each Day

A final blessing: the preparation that we do for High Holidays

is worthy, it’s useful, it’s valid.

But, on another level, it’s a game we play with ourselves.

Every day, can be a time of lengthening days.

And every **moment** can be a moment of transformation.

In fact, transformation generally happens that fast—in a moment.

A moment of decision. To play out takes longer, but teshuvah is acquired in a single hour.

For some people in this room, this is the hour.

This is the time to admit what you know, and to commit to real change.

From this point forth, you will be able to say:

Never in all my days could I look back in innocence and say, I don't know where the time went, or what I did to waste it.

For always, in all my days, I knew what it meant to “lengthen my days” and to treasure each day.

Turn to someone sitting next to you, share about one of three things:

1. what the Rabbis responses raised in you, which of the resonated with you
 2. your lengthened day and what it taught you about how to live
 3. your own principle of what you aspire to do
- “never in all my days” or “always, in all my days”

[[[DELETE A member sent me a wonderfully gracious e-mail following RH services. He wrote:

I think that your preparation for these service

Must have included your whole life.

The truth is: that's accurate for all of us.

Your preparation for these services have included your whole life.

Your life's journey has led to this moment. //]]]

- Rava said: At the hour when a person is led in for Judgement, they ask him: “Did you negotiate and conduct business with integrity? Did you set fixed times for Torah learning? Did you occupy yourself with the development of the next generation? Did you hope for salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom? Did you come to understand how one thing leads to another?” –Talmud Shabbat 31a
 - Jewish Lights Publishing has a packet for rabbis with sermons based on Ron Wolfson's book, *The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven: Reviewing and Renewing Your Life on Earth*
- Distribute questions for study at home. Leave people with a question to bring into the year. Send a follow up email.
- Aim for a memory to last the whole year – through story, humor, refrain, imagery, even gimmick.
 - A few favorite images:
 - unforgiveness as reptile; rat; pot that boils over; hot coal in your hand; jail-but you are stuck being the jailer; a bad i.o.u. you are trying to collect on.

- “Consciousness is like tofu (it depends what you marinate it in).” – Reb Zalman.
- Travel light (jettison grudges and dead dreams).
- Consider to whom a sin belongs. Are you holding someone else’s? Give it back (send it as a balloon or as a heavy exercise ball, but toss it). If it’s theirs, give them the opportunity to deal with it by ceding ownership of it. Let go.
- Tashlich (the river only flows one way; make room for the new by casting off the old – Ez 18:31).
- Refrains
 - One of my best sermons is on the CD Compassion Constantly. It uses the refrain “You Never Really Know...” – and it goes by the same title. It’s a phrase that brings up humility in oneself and compassion for others.
- Mnemonics. If you make three points, adjust your language so each theme starts with the same letter, or so that they spell out abc.
- The “rule of three.” Many good sermons have a three-part structure, which is easy both to absorb and to remember.
 - I once gave a good sermon on three kinds of evil, based on the following text: “The evils that befall humanity are of three kinds: the first kind is that which is caused to a person by the circumstance that he is subject to genesis and destruction, in other words that he possesses a body and is subject to change, flood, and fire... The second class of harm comprises such evils as people cause to each other. For example, when some of them use their strength against others. These evils are more numerous than those of the first kind; their causes are numerous and known. The third class of evil comprises those which every one causes to himself by his own action. This is the largest class and is far more numerous than the second class.” –Maimonides *Moreh Nevuchim* III:12
- Gimmicks. The following is also sermon which uses a three-part structure, but I choose it, also, because it demonstrates the use of shameless GIMMICKS. It’s a sermon about waking up, and I asked a congregant to blow the Shofar during my sermon, to truly wake people up, and to help wire the sermon into their nervous systems and memories. More than that, it’s a sermon that tried to plug into something that really touched and affected people, in this case the coma of a beloved community member. The following is the DRAFT.

“How to Wake Up”

Shana Tova.

Most of you know that we are privileged to host Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi again this year for Yom Kippur. I am so delighted. He is a gadol bador (a truly great leader of our generation).

You may have heard Reb Zalman tell the story – which also appears in his wonderful book *Jewish with Feeling* – about putting his daughter Shalvi to bed at night when she was a girl. Like a lot of young people, Shalvi was stalling. She liked the quiet time with her Abba at night, and so she used the time to ask questions – questions that would engage her father, and keep her up later.

“Abba,’ she asked one night, “when are asleep you can wake up, right?”

Right, agreed Reb Zalman.

When you are awake, can you wake up even more?

Ahh...

That’s the question of this season. Can we wake up more? Will we wake up even more?

We need to awaken our consciences, to become aware, so we can repent.

We need to wake up to the possibility of change.

We need to stop sleepwalking through critical parts of our lives, and become aware, awake, and engaged again.

The truth is, as Shalvi pointed out, that wakefulness is not absolute. It exists on a continuum.

We may be awake, but disoriented in those first few minutes of the morning.

We may be awake and especially open and suggestible, during the last few minutes before drifting off to sleep.

We may be very much awake in some regards, but parts of our body or spirit may have shut down.

We may be awake, but our conscience may be anesthetized.

The literal and metaphorical truth behind Shalvi’s analogy is especially vivid for me this year, because of my friend, Joan Hyler. Joan has been a member and friend of Makom Ohr Shalom, and, among many other claims and good works, she also founded the Tuesday Torah study group I teach.

She was hit by a car several weeks ago, and was in a coma. For the first week, she made some good progress, from the doctors’ perspective. She initiated breathing. Her wounds were healing. But after about a week, the doctors couldn’t observe any progress. They became concerned. Her sister, Nancy, was desperately worried. And then she remembered. “This is Joan. Joan loves the Jewish calendar. She is waiting for Elul to wake up. She wants to wake up in time for High Holidays.” Nancy told me that comforting thought on the 5th day of Elul – I remember because it was the same day that Joan first opened her eyes.

I see your smiles. I hear that in-take of breath – that happy surprise and thanksgiving. Baruch Hashem, blessed be God - it is, truly, a miracle.

After an astonishing number of injuries, Joan is finding her way back to wakefulness and engagement. As of erev Rosh Hashanah, she was awake for up to 45 minutes at a time. Still on breathing tubes, she can't yet speak. But she does (according to Nancy's written update for friends and family) "nod appropriately, smile, participate with her presence, listen to conversations, mouth words spontaneously and in response to questions, and do the smoochy thing (blow kisses)."

When a pedestrian has been hit by a car, and locked for a period of time in a coma, waking up to this degree is astonishing.

You can take nothing for granted.

Every aspect of wakefulness is significant.

Every nod, every smile, every kiss, every word, every opportunity to "participate with simple presence" is a gift.

But when the miracles are more subtle, we start to take everything for granted. We wake up after 8 hours of sleep, with limbs and speech and memory intact – and who has time to even notice, with all our obligations and tasks? We have to get going. We have to get doing. We don't have time to wake up to waking up. To see what there is to see. To experience the miracle.

Coma, sleep, and alertness -- are all on the continuum. So is enlightenment.

There are many degrees of wakefulness, and many ways to wake up.

Today, I want to look at three strategies for waking up in life that are suggested by three Jewish traditions around waking up in the morning.

The first tradition is one I have been alluding to already: we give thanks.

This is what Joseph Karo, the great legalist and Kabbalist, wrote in the very beginning of his guide to Jewish living, the Shulchan Aruch, written in the 16th century and still widely used today: "While still lying in bed," Karo said, "you should realize in Whose presence you recline, and immediately upon awakening give thanks for God's lovingkindness, in as much as your soul, which was committed to God faint and weary, was restored to you renewed and refreshed, enabling you to serve God devotedly all day

long.... Every morning, you are like a newborn being, and for this you must thank God with all your heart.”

I won't ask for a show of hands to see who cultivates exactly these thoughts before hitting the snooze button on the alarm clock every morning. But I do hope that, in the coming year, it will be more of us.

Let's practice now, the traditional prayer, with which Jews greet a new day.

See if you can not just repeat after me, but affirm what I am saying for yourself. It's a chant written by Rabbi/Cantor Monty Turner:

Let's say it with full intention – first in English, then in Hebrew:

Modeh ani -

I give thanks

Here before you

Ever living God

Ruler, Guide

You have renewed in me

Life and soul

In your mercy

Your infinite mercy

Great is your faithfulness

Great is your faithfulness.

That's a good start for the morning. A beautifully grateful way to begin each day.

The message of the morning prayers is: Wake up to your blessings!

Waking up is itself a blessing – as anyone who has been critically ill, or lost a loved one can tell you.

I know and trust you will find many more prayers and strategies for staying grateful and recognizing your blessing throughout the day, throughout the year. ///

Along with morning gratitude, the Shulchan Aruch offers two more waking-up strategies that I want to share with you.

It is not enough to have an attitude of gratitude, we must also cultivate strength. Gratitude blesses the good we have. Strength demands that we preserve and increase the good.

Again, I want to quote from Joseph Karo, the Shulchan Aruch: It is our duty [as the sage yehdah ben teymah teaches] to make ourselves strong as lions. Immediately after waking from sleep and reciting the Modeh Ani, rise quickly and be ready to serve the Creator, blessed be God, before the impulse to do evil (the yetzer hara) can dissuade you from rising, and send you back to bed with excuses.”

Wake up with strength, wake up with conviction.

Wake up to your holy work and purpose and not to excuses.

Do you consider yourself a lion? Do you know how strong and powerful you are?

Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “If [a person] were able to survey at a glance all he has done in the course of his life, what would he feel? He would be terrified at the extent of his own power.”

You have untold influence. You affect people in countless ways. Your choices matter. Wake up! Wake up to your power!

Annie – here is where you BLOW SHOFAR.

The Shofar is not an interruption. It IS the sermon. It is sounding the alarm, calling us to wake up. More than 800 years ago, the great Moses Maimonides put it this way:

“When the Shofar sounds it is as if to say, “Wake up sleepy ones from your slumbers, seek out your deeds, rethink and return and remember your Creator. Wake up, those who forget the truth in their idle use of time and mistakenly use their years in empty and frivolous activity which does not help and will not save. Look at your souls and improve your ways and your designs. Everyone must leave their harmful ways, and their thoughts which are not good.”

Therefore, Maimonides teaches, based on the Talmud, each of us should see ourselves the year round as if having committed an equal number of good and bad deeds. Similarly, we should imagine that the scales that measure the world’s merit hang in perfect balance – with an equal number of good on one side and bad deeds on the other. So, if you commit one sin, you have tipped your scales and the scales of the world toward destruction. And if you perform one mitzvah you have tipped your scales and the scales of the world toward salvation.

You are that powerful!

Every time you get up in the morning, every time the Shofar blasts, the message goes out:

Wake up to your past sins!

Wake up to your power! You are more than a lion!

Wake up to the possibility of change! ////////////////

There is one last custom I want to review with you. The first two ways of waking up –gratitude and strength – are attitudes. But this third one is very concrete. The tradition is to wash your hands, and especially your fingers, first thing in the morning.

The Shulchan Aruch gives two reasons for this: one is taken from Psalm 26, a psalm which asks God to find us blameless. “I wash my hands in innocence,” says the Psalmist, “I circle about your altar, Adonai.”

Just as the priests washed their hands before performing their service in the Temple, it’s a custom for Jews today, still, to wash our hands before performing our service out in the world.

Washing our hands in this ritual fashion is a reminder that we need to distance ourselves from sin and sinners, and to align ourselves with God and the godly.

Karo gives a second reason for morning handwashing, this one promoted by the Kabbalists. The Zohar teaches that when we sleep, unclean spirits can come upon us, and when they leave in the morning, they leave a residue on our fingers, which we need to wash off.

Some people take this literally, but I believe this is a teaching not about demons //as much as it is about residue.

The truth is that our hands get dirty – with sin, with tainted money, with forbidden things we have touched – and we need a way to cleanse.

We use a lot of external means and metaphors on the High Holidays.

Take your sins and put them on this goat, and exile that goat to a dry wilderness. Call it a scape goat. It will die, not you.

Or take this chicken, heap your sins upon it. Slaughter it, and serve it as food for the poor, to gain a mitzvah before the New Year. Thus, transform sin into goodness.

Or, take these breadcrumbs and cast them in the water, and imagine that, as the water carries them away, it carries away your sins with them.

Negel vasser, washing hands each morning, is the same. It reminds us that there are things we have done, and words we have spoken, and ways we have been, that leave us with an uncomfortable, impure residue, we need to be rid of.

Washing hands is the physical action we take, to symbolize something that can't actually be externalized or cast off or washed away so easily.

It reminds us that teshuvah (repentance, transformation) is (despite all these external symbols and projections) always ultimately an inside job.

The goat and the chicken and the breadcrumbs and the handwashing are hints from the tradition about how to transform, how to substitute goodness for sin in your own life. If we see them as convenient “get out of jail free” cards or easy bait-and-switch techniques, we have missed the point.

Wake up and see the residue of sin that remains! Wake up to clean hands and a pure heart!//

Have you ever had one of those dreams, when suddenly while, dreaming you realize that you must be asleep? That is the first stage of waking up.

That's also the first stage of repentance. To realize that you have been sleeping and slumbering, inattentive, unconscious.

And the minute you know that, you are are awakening.

Today and every day,

Wake up to your blessings!

Wake up to your strength!

Wake up to your sins – and your potential for purity!

In Hebrew, the verb “wake up” is reflexive. Lehitorer. You have to wake yourself up. Joan did it. We can do it, too.

Every week in the Lecha Dodi prayer, during Friday night services, we sing a verse about waking up by another Kabbalist, Shlomo Halevy Alkabetz, a contemporary and colleague of Joseph Karo. This verse is inspired by chapter 60 of the book of Isaiah. And it’s generally understood to be about Jerusalem. But it also applies to each one of us. It’s about you.

I am going to chant this first in English translation and then in Hebrew. I hope you will receive it as a blessing.

Hitoreri – hitoreri, etc.

Wake up, wake up

Reflexively

Here comes your Light

For all to see

Arise, awaken

With song renew

The glory of God is revealed in You.

I want to end now with a call to awakening.

If you have a shofar with you today, I invite you to rise now and assist me with this call.

Hitoreru. Wake up to blessings, to strength, to purity, to your own Light, to the glory of God in you.

Tekiyah Gedolah by Annie. FINAL SHOFAR BLAST.

- Humor.
 - Today’s sermon is entitled “Don’t Give Up.” Many times, I was sorely tempted to give up on this topic, but somehow that just didn’t seem right.”
 - In a sermon on Zichronot – Memory, I used Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zahkhor*. I drew on Oliver Sacks and other writers. I also used humor: “What is the difference between a Jew and an elephant? An elephant eventually forgets.”

- I have included this lengthy bit of humor in two sermons on two different occasions. It addresses the themes of acknowledging the good, judging on the scale of merit, appreciation, and joy.

Two great rabbis, Jack Reimer and Joseph Telushkin, share the following story about hakarat hatov. It has brought me a lot of joy – as I hope it will to you, too. It was told by Art Buchwald, in one of his many thousands of columns. And it reads like this:

I was in New York the other day and rode with a friend in a taxi. When we got out, my friend said to the driver, “Thank you for the ride. You did such a superb job of driving.”

The taxi driver was stunned for a second. Then he said, “Are you a wise guy or something?”

No, my dear man. And I’m not putting you on. I admire the way you keep cool in heavy traffic.

“Yeah,” the driver said and drove off.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“I am trying to bring love back to New York,” he said. I believe it is the only thing that can save the city.

“How can one man save New York?”

“It’s not one man. I believe I have made the taxi driver’s day. Suppose he has 20 fares. He’s going to be nice to the 20 fares because someone was nice to him. Those fares in turn will be kinder to their employees or shopkeepers or waiters or even their own families. Eventually, the goodwill could spread to at least 1,000 people. Now, that’s not bad, is it?”

“But you’re depending on that taxi driver to pass on your good will to others.”

“I’m not depending on it,” my friend said. “I’m aware that the system isn’t foolproof. I might deal with 10 different people today. If, out of ten, I can make 3 happy, then eventually I can indirectly influence the attitudes of 3,000 more.”

“It sounds good on paper, I admitted, “but I am not sure it works in practice.

“Nothing is lost if it doesn’t. It didn’t take any of my time to tell the man he was doing a good job. He neither received a larger, nor a smaller tip. If it falls on deaf ears, so what? Tomorrow, there will be another taxi driver whom I can try to make happy.”

“You’re some kind of nut,” I said.

That shows how cynical you have become. I have made a study of this. The thing that seems to be lacking, besides money, of course, for our postal employees, is that no one tells people who work for the post office what a good job they’re doing.”

“But they’re NOT doing a good job.”

“Maybe they’re not doing a good job because they feel no one cares if they do or not. Why shouldn’t someone say a kind word to them?”

We were walking past a structure in the process of being built and passed five workmen eating their lunch. My friend stopped. “That’s a magnificent job you men have done. It must be difficult and dangerous work.”

The five men eyed my friend suspiciously.

“When will it be finished?”

“June,” one of the men grunted.

“Ah, that really is impressive. You must all be very proud.”

We walked away. I said to him, “I haven’t seen anyone like you since Man of La Mancha.”

“When those men digest my words, they will feel better for it. Somehow, the city will benefit from their happiness.”

“But you can’t do this alone!” I protested, “you’re just one man.”

“The most important thing is not to get discouraged. Helping people in the city become kind again is not an easy job. But if I can enlist other people in my campaign...”

“Did you just wink at an elderly woman?” [edited this slightly to eliminate some sexism]

“Yes, I did,” he replied. “And whomever she is meeting later is in for a FANTASTIC day.”

- I created the following sermon, in part because the title was so odd and funny that I thought it would be memorable to last through the year. The High Holidays also followed some major power outages, so I knew people would relate to refrigerators and the food that spoils or keeps in them, in a special way. (This sermon would go wonderfully with the gimmick of a refrigerator magnet, but I didn’t use that.)

5772 Refrigerator Sermon

Shana Tovah. G’mar Chatimah Tovah. May it be a good year, and may we be sealed in the Book of Life.

I have a theme and title for my sermon tonight, which may be a little surprising. I crafted it on purpose to be unconventional, with the intention that it also be memorable.

So whatever else you carry from the High Holidays into the year, I hope that you will remember these words of Rabbinic wisdom:

Everything I ever needed to know about repentance, I learned from my refrigerator.

Yes, right now, at the start of the fast (while you are not yet too hungry) I want to talk to you about refrigerators.

Today in the United States, we don’t get too excited about a refrigerator. And that’s one of the reasons the title and imagery of my remarks tonight seem so incongruous.

Rabbi, on the holiest night of the year, your best analogy is a fridge?

Well, we may take refrigerators for granted, but they are an amazing and rare luxury. For most of human history, people got sick and died every day for the lack of a reliable way to preserve food. A hundred years ago, Kings and Queens didn't have this astonishing invention. Some of us here today remember when even the "ice box" and the "ice man" were available only to the wealthy. EVEN today, across Africa, South America, and Asia, insulin, vaccines, AIDS cocktails, and other medicines are compromised or ruined because of the simple lack of refrigeration.

Because refrigeration is not available, one-third of all fruits and vegetables in India ends up destroyed or spoiled on the way to market. This puts both farmers and consumers at risk in a country where people literally – and commonly -- starve to death.

To us, refrigerators don't make the difference between life and death – but only because we each have access to them. We feel the **inconvenience** when our home refrigerator stops operating, but how often do we **appreciate** it all the thousands of hours when it is **there** for us, operating reliably, without our attention or maintenance – all year long?

Richard Alpert is a chozer bitshuvah (a Jew who returned to Judaism). Better known Ram Daas, he has served as a teacher of Hindu spirituality to thousands of people. Someone asked him once why Hinduism and Judaism and so many other religious traditions use breath in meditation and prayer. And he gave a beautiful and simple answer: we use breath because everybody's got one. Everyone has a breath, just as everyone has a soul.

Both are vital, yet it is relatively rare to be aware of either.

Kol Haneshama tehallel ya.

Let everything that has breath – **let every soul** – praise God.

In our corner of the world, when it comes to refrigerators, everybody's got one. So I want to talk to you tonight, on the holiest night of the year, about your fridge. And about what our awareness of refrigerators might help us do in the realm of the soul.

Have you ever had that experience of opening up the refrigerator, and sensing, as soon as you opened it, that something wasn't right inside. Maybe there was just a slight odor, or you could see that it wasn't clean in there. ///What did you do?

I have discovered, through extensive research gleaned from talking to – frankly – just a handful people, that the answer depends on two key factors:

Number 1) the extent of the problem – how bad is it really? and Number 2) gender.

If the problem isn't too bad, you may just close the refrigerator and hope that it gets better on its own, by the next time you open it.

Or if the problem isn't overwhelming, you might get out some baking soda or other deodorizer and put it in to the fridge to cover the smell.

If these remedies sound unacceptable to you – if you are horrified at this whole discussion, then – again, through extensive scientific research gleaned by talking casually to a few families -- I can predict one of three things about you.

You're the main cleaner in your household,

OR you're a woman,

OR most likely, both.

Now, stick with me. This sermon is actually NOT all about refrigerators – **or** sex-role stereotypes. I am laying a foundation here for teshuvah, repentance.

Even if you are the type who can just keep using the fridge and hoping for some spontaneous remission of mold, there will **come** a time when you are afraid to open up the refrigerator and see what is inside there. You don't even want to **look**. You don't even want to **know**. //If you have ever been in the kitchen of a college dorm, you know what I'm talking about.

So, imagine that your soul is a refrigerator. And there are many fresh and juicy and healthy things to partake of in there. But there are also contents that once, perhaps, used to be nourishing and are now FAR BEYOND their expiration date.

You may be tempted not to open up. Not to take an inventory. Not to look inside.

But with refrigerators and souls, the time comes when you have to. You need something from inside, and when you reach **in** for it, you are HIT with the awareness: something has GONE BAD in here.

And at that point, many people will find their motivation. I want to get to the SOURCE of this problem. I must ROOT it out. I want to find what is wrong and clean it out! Tashlich – throw it away! Make room for what will **feed** me and not **offend** me. And now, we're not exactly talking about refrigerators anymore.

I can imagine what some of you are thinking... this analogy *is* “*memorable*,” but rabbi, have you been telling me, that if I look deep inside I will find that ... something ... stinks!?”

Well, with love I must tell you, yes. And thanks for noticing. Because that *is* the message, that is the experience we are meant to have on Yom Kippur. We are meant to open up areas we have been reluctant to look into, places where we may have made some cursory efforts to cleanse. And then we face the hard truth: Something stinks.

We need to investigate: what has gone rotten in our lives, and what are we doing to do about it? It's not enough to, as it were, open the door to our souls just long enough to throw in some *reach nichoach* – some beautifully-scented prayers. We need to actually do an inventory, see what we have accumulated, decide what to keep, and clear out anything that has gone bad.

What was good for our souls at one point can, if left to fester, become poisonous to us. And, if we keep what is toxic around, it can ruin other things in our lives and spirits – which may have remained perfectly wholesome, but for their contact with what was spoiled.

How do you repent? In the words of Rabbi David Wolfe-Blank in his rendition of the Ashamnu prayer: Sweep it out! Throw it out! Wipe it out! Yes, clean it all out!

Of course, everything is easier to clean with regular maintenance. In the Jewish tradition, we are not meant to store up all our sins and unforgiveness, so we can deal with them on High Holidays. **Every** day, is a day for reconciliation with God and with people. Every **day**, in our liturgy we beat our chests and pray: slach lanu avinu. Mechal lanu avinu ki pashanu. Forgive us, pardon us for we have sinned. The monthly New Moon festival has two names: Rosh Hodesh (the head or beginning of the month) and Yom Kippur katan (a miniature Yom Kippur), because it is a tradition to conduct a life-review not just once a year at the beginning of the Hebrew calendar, but each month, at the beginning of the Hebrew month.

Regular maintenance will keep your refrigerator and your soul shining.

This past summer, my family, like many of you, suffered some power outages. And the advice we got from the electric company was: don't open your refrigerator. In general, it's good to look inside. You want to use and keep track of what you have. You want to nourish yourself and your family. You want to do your maintenance.

But in the midst of a storm, when the power is off, keep the door closed.

The analogy to the soul is clear. We want to be able to look inside our neshamas, our souls. We want to sustain ourselves and our families by using and cleaning and replenishing what we hold within. But when life's storms hit, when we are drained and without power, that is NOT the time to do the inventory and the deep cleaning.

There are times – with souls as with refrigerators – to be protective. Yes, there is a danger of spoilage if you won't regularly look within. But in times of crisis, there is a **greater** danger if you expose what lies within to a climate that is not controlled.

We don't criticize our refrigerators when they fail to work during a power-outage. We protect the interior and maintain as conducive an atmosphere inside as we can.

So it is with our souls. When your power is cut off, remember:

Energy will return. Normalcy will return. In the meantime, be patient. If you are in a crisis, protect what is inside – don't open up easily, now is not the time for cleansing and re-organization. Now is the time for preservation. And soon, for repair.

That is an important teaching you can learn from a simple refrigerator, and I believe that principle can be truly freeing for someone in this congregation today.

But it doesn't apply to everyone. While some folks here have been pursuing interior work too soon, most of us have been delaying too long.

When I was growing up, my dad used to dislike our wasting energy by randomly opening the refrigerator and looking around. He would say, in the classic way of American dads, "nothing changed in there since the last time you opened it two minutes ago. Close the door unless you've got some business in there!"

That's not just good advice in terms of energy savings and your electric bill, it's good spiritual advice on the High Holidays, too.

Nothing will change by looking casually and noodling around inside. Nothing changes just by opening and closing the door. At a certain point – and Yom Kippur is a propitious time -- you've got to prop the door open and say, "I'm going in!"

You REALLY look,
 you CLEAR the contents,
 you SURVEY what is inside,
 you make SELECTIONS,
 you get RID of what doesn't nurture you,
 you ROOT OUT everything that might poison you,
 you DISCOVER hidden treasures that you may have stored away for later and forgotten about entirely.

Don't let the High Holidays be the time when you do the equivalent of just visiting the refrigerator and poking around. Investigate what you are holding inside! Toss out old grudges and bad attitudes! Refresh and reorganize your thinking! Repackage worthy plans and intentions! Bring to the fore sweet delicacies that may have been pushed aside!

My grandmother Libby always had an extra – and older -- refrigerator in her basement. The earliest basement fridge I can remember was a hand-me-down of an old, inefficient model. It was labeled "frost

free.” But we kids used to call it “frost **freeze.**” It collected ice and icicles not only on the freezer section, but even in the refrigerator.

One time, I was visiting over a weekend, with a long lazy Sunday lay in front of us. My grandmother brought pots of boiling water down to the basement to melt the excess. She used the claw of a hammer on the ice inside that refrigerator. She worked for a long time; I helped and we talked.

When we finally cleared out all the ice, there was a lot of room. It was spacious in there. You weren't looking at frost and ice anymore. You could see the shiny layer underneath.

When it comes to the soul, too,

Sometimes you have to turn up the heat on what lies inside. Sometimes, you need to deploy a sharp instrument to remove excess.

The process isn't instantaneous, and the effects don't last forever.

But after each cleansing, your heart-space will grow.

At services like this and on random quiet afternoons,

keep melting the ice around your heart and soul,

and you will discover that which shines underneath.

I've saved my favorite refrigerator story for last. My sister-in-law, Susan, is a very sweet tempered person. She is also very organized and clean.

My brother, Rafy, despite being a doctor who keeps a sterile environment at the office, is definitely the messier one. He is someone who might just open up a fridge, smell something bad, and close it again, in hopes that the smell would improve with time.

Well, one day, Rafy came downstairs in the morning to find his sweet wife, Sue, fed up. She was going through the refrigerator and angrily tossing almost everything in the trash. “Am I the only one who notices when things are spoiled around here?” she wanted to know.

Rafy was prepared to admit that he had been oblivious, but then he noticed that Sue was throwing out a brand new bottle of milk. He had just bought it the day before. He saved it from the trash heap and took a sniff.

Sue said, “I know it's not expired, but it's spoiled, - just like everything else in this lousy refrigerator.”

Rafy smiled at her. Sue became infuriated. “What are you smiling about?” she asked. Don't you even know when I'm mad at you?” I do know said, Rafy. But you don't know seem to know when you're pregnant.

As a doctor, Rafy knew of a symptom called dysgeusia

dis-GYOO-zhuh, which commonly occurs during the first trimester of pregnancy. Your sense of smell is disturbed and all sorts of foods smell bad to you. Dysguesia and **mood swings**, are two classic symptoms of early pregnancy. Rafy realized that something had changed in his wife, not in the food. Sure enough, their first child, now age 16, was born nine months later. ///

When we engage in introspection at this time of year, we are looking inside to take inventory – to see what needs to be preserved, what we would enjoy partaking of, and what ought to be tossed. And realizing that something is rotten is a GOOD thing. You can't remedy what you shove to the back of your mind – or, for that matter, your fridge.

But sometimes, we look inside and get the sense that “everything stinks around here”—when actually NOTHING is rotten. The truth is that a seed has been implanted within us, something is getting ready to be born. A **global** sense of dissatisfaction can mean that you are ready for life's next big step.

Don't dismiss or disregard your spiritual dis-GYOO-zhuh. Pay attention to it. Discover what it is REALLY trying to tell you. A new and holy work is happening in you.

As your rabbi, I am here to tell you that you are not just dissatisfied or in a bad mood. You are spiritually pregnant.

You can birth the good that you hold deep inside, safely and with joy, if you will just recognize the truth behind your symptoms and nurture what is growing within you.

Don't just toss away what you have gathered in disgust. Investigate: what do you need to let go, and what do you need to birth?/////

Repeat: what do you need to let go, and what do you need to birth?

It's the **nature** of refrigerators that they need to be restocked. You can't go to the store and buy everything for the whole year. And if you try to hoard in that way, some of what you acquire will inevitably spoil.

The nature of souls, too, is that they need regular replenishment. Kol Nidrei is a vital and beautiful time to be in shul. But you can't feed your soul for a year on what you acquire one night – not even this Holy Night.

Yom Kippur is 25 hours out of a **life-long process** of gathering resources, using them, sharing them, and then restocking.

Every day you are blessed with is **one** day in a **life-long** process of acquiring, cleansing, organizing, and pruning that which sustains you.

I hope that you will create many opportunities to replenish this year.

Join us here at synagogue throughout the year for prayers and programming. We have so many opportunities that can nurture you.

Preserve or create rituals that help you replenish at home. For example:

What if, every time you opened your refrigerator in 5772, you took that as a signal to remember your soul – to take a deep breath and simply be present to the reality of your inner life.

[[[What if, every time you discovered something in your refrigerator that needs to be discarded, you conducted a spiritual tashlich?]]]]

Or if each time you cleaned your refrigerator, you took a few moments to sit down and pray or meditate. -- to cleanse and do the upkeep on your soul.///

Tonight, at the start of the fast, we close our refrigerators. We remove the distraction of eating and of cooking and of planning for our next meal. But let's not forget WHY we do that.

We close our refrigerators, that we might **open** our hearts and souls. ////

This year, may you develop ever-greater empathy for all those in need.

May you clean and clear, discover and be delighted.

May your satisfaction, as you look within, be rewarded with harvest -- so that you are able to use your resources to nurture yourself and others.

May your DISsatisfaction bring a new work that will be done this year, in and through your labors. ///

The thing about refrigerators and souls in Bergen County is that everybody's got one.

May we use and maintain them well this year. Amen.

- Use what is most present and most urgent.
 - We all know this. Following 9/11, every rabbi had to tear up High Holiday sermons and start anew.
 - Most years, the urgency is not that dramatic. But don't neglect to search out for what is (perhaps more subtly) urgent for the world, the Jews, your community, and (not at the center of it all, but not least of all) you.
 - I gave a sermon on how to die the year after two beloved community members died – both in very different ways, from very different diseases; both painfully and both beautifully.

I gave a sermon in 2008 at the time of the economic downturn when many people were out of work and dreaming of winning the lottery, two weeks after my husband was diagnosed with cancer. LOTTERY DRASH- Good news. This sermon appears on my CD Gratitude.

Dear Friends,

I want to begin my drash this morning with some good news.

I won't keep you in suspense: ///

Craig and I have won the lottery. We haven't yet parsed out what all the numbers mean in terms of income (and I wouldn't discuss money on shabbos and yontif in any case), but it's my pleasure to announce that our winnings are significant. We won't need to worry about money for the rest of our lives.

We have been busily thinking of all the wonderful things we will do together.

The family time.

The travel.

The enhancement of our home.

But nothing is more delightful to us than making a tzedakah plan, assigning resources to people and causes that deserve it – and need us.

You can be sure that Makom Ohr Shalom is at the top of our list.

Now many of you know that Craig has also had DIFFICULT news, lately, about his health. And nothing has changed that. Yet, just KNOWING that we have won the lottery, gives me an extra measure of hope. I feel somehow that life will be EASIER, that we'll be able to handle whatever comes our way -- with Craig's health or anything else. It's a siman tov and a mazal tov. A good sign of a good destiny. Yehh lanu ulechol yisrael. May it be thus for us and for all the people of Israel, and for the whole world.

...

But given the excitement in the room, I do want to express caution about a very real and under-estimated down-side.

A lot can go wrong for lottery winners. National statistics show that about one third of those who win a sizable prize file for bankruptcy within just a few years.

It's not easy to manage the taxes,
the legitimate requests for help
-- and the scam artists.

It can be surprisingly difficult, emotionally and spiritually, to adjust to a windfall.

Depression, addiction, crime sprees, and divorce [not us, honey] are common among winners – even among winners with no previous disposition for these miseries.

One extensive study done in Britain shows that there is only about a 43% chance that lottery winners will be as happy AFTER winning the lottery as they were BEFORE.

I know what you are thinking:

I'll TAKE those risks. I'll take my chance with a windfall.

And I feel the same way.

Somehow, I hope and believe that Craig and I will NOT be “one of the statistics.” I pray that we will manage our fortune wisely.

But the truth is that most winners don't. And we need to bear that in mind.

In fact, that's precisely what I want to address with you today. How can we manage WHATEVER abundance we have wisely? How can we all avoid succumbing to the shadow side of our blessings? Yevarechech adonai veyishmerecha. May God bless us – and, when needed, may God protect us from those very blessings.

Perhaps, before we delve in to these profound issues, I should add a small caveat. The winning numbers for the lottery have not yet been announced. But I DID buy a ticket at Reb Zalman's suggestion. I put the stub in my wallet, and I am feeling very, VERY confident.

However, by external standards of judgment, it would be fair to say that the jury is still out.

TECHNICALLY, I don't yet KNOW that we have won the California lottery. ///

I can imagine what you are thinking. Has the rabbi gone crazy? Why is she toying with us? Did she just mislead us from the bimah on one of the holiest days of the year?

Not at all. I want to assure you, that I – WON – The – LOTTERY. //

And so did you.

demographic lottery. This is not just a cute turn of phrase. Through no particular skill or merit, we prevailed when the VAST MAJORITY were not chosen. We were born!

We were born at a time of great freedom and promise. And we live in the country with the greatest freedom and the greatest promise in world history.

We were born – or we converted or affiliated into – a people with a blessed and blessing legacy. Barch ata adoni eloheyu melech ha'olam, sheasani yisrael. Thank you, God, for making me a Jew.

We were born into a world that previous generations couldn't have imagined in their wildest fantasies – a world with a vibrant Jewish state and a Diaspora that largely accepts its Jews.

For two thousand years, Jews prayed to return to Zion, and our generation has won that prize.

For just as long, Jews have been routinely persecuted and expelled. Now, we are vastly safer.

What odds would your grandparents have placed on a Jew being accepted into the Kennedy clan?

What odds would your grandparents have placed on Israel becoming a major power -- militarily, economically, technologically, and culturally?

Not only did we win the demographic lottery, we won the health lottery. Imagine if you were coping daily

with the AIDS epidemic of Africa, which has claimed the lives of an estimated two million people. In some African nations, more than one quarter of the population is HIV positive. Twelve million **children** throughout the world have been **orphaned** by AIDS. ///
 Water shortages and the lack of clean water routinely kill millions. A hundred years ago, even Kings and Queens did not have the luxury of hot and cold running water that we – the lucky few -- take utterly for granted.

Malnutrition is a significant factor in more than half of all child-deaths worldwide - a proportion unmatched by any infectious disease since the Black Death. Every 3.6 seconds [look at watch and count] a human being on this planet dies of starvation.

[[[[[Many people live in despotic circumstances where they lack access to education or control of basic decisions such as who to marry, They fear repression from family, clan, government if they speak their minds. We take for granted our basic rights to personal integrity and free speech.]]]]]

We fantasize about winning the “super- lotto mega millions,” while millions of deserving people fantasize about the basic **safety** and **rights** that WE enjoy as a matter of course.

Three billion people in this world struggle to live on less than two U.S. dollars per day. Truly, we have already won the lottery. //

Of course, people here in the United States also have real troubles. Troubles with health – and with money – troubles of every imaginable kind.

The most luxurious mansion doesn't insure that your children will live long. There are people sitting in this congregation who can personally, tragically testify to that.

There are people sitting in this congregation who have lost homes in the last year.

There are people who have lost jobs– and who don't know how they will pay for basic expenses.

I don't make light of suffering, just because it happens in a city where we have clean running water. I don't dismiss THIS suffering as unimportant, compared to the bloated bellies of starving children in India.

I believe that all suffering is SUPREMELY important – not only to those whom it affects first-hand, but to the **community** and to **God**.

That's why our synagogue offers confidential special arrangements for anyone who needs them.

That's why we are collecting food for Sova and raising awareness and money for Darfur.

That's why we engage in fundraising for the synagogue itself. That's why we PRAY in the plural.

Precisely in LIGHT of the economic downturn, I want to put our material needs and problems in context.

We might fantasize about first-class vacations or other luxuries, but what is money REALLY for? ///It gives us security.

Doesn't it?

Well, ask the people who invested with a respected financial guru, who promised no booms and no busts – just a steady 10-12% a year. Bernie Madoff’s victims were NOT secure, nor (as it turned out) was the entire mortgage industry, nor real estate, nor the stock market.

In case your stock broker hasn’t told you, your rabbi will: **There is no security in material things.**

Not in your 401K.

Not in your house, as we have discovered through both fires and foreclosures this year.

Not even your own BODY is secure. Your wonderful rebbetzin Craig is dealing with that, personally and powerfully.

But it’s true for **everyone**. (Reb Zalman – “future geshtorben society)

120 years from now, pooh, pooh, our bodies will all eventually fail us, give out.

There is no security in physical things.

But there is something more **secure** than your **material fortune**, and even more IMPORTANT than your material **suffering**. Whatever your material circumstances, you have what it takes to make a truly GOOD and happy year. You have the resources that matter. God. Community. Family. Friends. You have won the SPIRITUAL lottery.

The only things we can count on, ultimately, are things that misers don’t count.

True stability and security lie with that which cannot be measured.

Your soul.

Your love.

Your faith.

Your friendship.

Your kindness and service.

These LAST. As spiritual resources, they depend on NO THING.

They don’t rise with the tides, nor recede with the downturns.

A stroke of good luck can’t GRANT them,

and a stroke of bad luck can’t take them away.

All the recent studies on positive psychology show that money does not make for lasting happiness. Yes, anyone who rises out of poverty raises their happiness quotient. But after basic needs are met (a roof over your head, food in your belly, medical care when you need it) more money does NOTHING to increase happiness.

I want to reiterate a statistic that I cited in a sermon last year: In the US, there is a huge jump in happiness between people who earn 10,000 and people who earn 50,000, but there is no increase in happiness – none! – when you exceed 50,000 in income per year.

At every income level, from poverty to millionaire status, the vast majority of people think that they would be happy and all their needs would be met, if only they could increase their income by about a third. Yet, when people jump to the next income level, they still want that extra third.

Every study – not to mention every issue of *People Magazine* – shows that money does NOT correlate with happiness. Yet, social science research shows definitively that GRATITUDE does. It promotes happiness and wellbeing. The simple act of recording three items a day for which you feel grateful will, according to a study done at UC Davis, – and here I quote from the abstract– significantly increase

“alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, energy, commitment to stated goals, physical exercise, and kindness.” [unquote]

Three expressions of gratitude each day can yield these priceless results.

Connection with community carries similar benefits. People who attend prayer services regularly -- are **happier** (hey--just reporting the social science research).

Research shows, too, that lifelong learning keeps you youthful and joyful. (Yeah, Torah!)

People who nurture close friendships are lastingly happier and less stressed than those who don't.

People who volunteer for worthy causes increase both their health and their happiness. ///

So, we have won the demographic lottery, and, relatively speaking, the health lottery. Moreover, we have won the spiritual lottery.

AND we have won life's ultimate and indispensable prize: the gift of time. Today, on the first day of a new year, we are keenly aware of the passage of time.

We made it through another year, though some of our loved ones did not.

We have a fresh, blank page before us in the Book of Life, though we do not know what the New Year will bring.

However long any of us has//, we have today. We have 24 hours IN THIS DAY.

What amount of money would you sell your day for? ///

You couldn't trade it for all the money in the world. ///

And who would want to?

This year, in light of all our good fortune, let's show TIME the respect it deserves. Let's give it value, by investing it in what lasts and what matters. We can use our time to prop up a false sense of security, or to build a genuinely solid foundation.

Let's devote MORE-- if not MOST -- of our time to the things that make life worth living:
gratitude and giving,
relationships and right action,
learning and loving.

I don't want to declare spiritual bankruptcy.

I REFUSE to blow through the riches of the calendar.

This year, I commit to using my fortune wisely.

////

Soon, in our service, we will recite a powerful prayer that encapsulates a lot of what I have been speaking about. The Unteneh Tokef asks us to look, closely, at how we have lived. Imagine that the Shofar Blast of Judgment Day is **sounded**, and **YOU ARE NOW BEING JUDGED**.

“Unetaneh Tokef kedushat hayom. Ki hu norah ve'ayom.

We declare the power of this holy day, for it arouses in us the deepest awe.”

Look at your priorities, your values -- and your past decisions, the prayer urges. Listen to the still small voice within.

Then, recognize that there are no guarantees.

Suffering will befall us all.
No one is getting out of here alive.

Who will die early, and who will enjoy length of years?
Who will fall into poverty, and who will be made rich?
Who will be humiliated, and who will be exalted?

Surely, we don't dare predict.
Surely, we don't dare judge anyone else's predicament.

But, just when the prayer brings us to a searing recognition of our fundamental insecurity, it gives us the **good** news:

We have already won the spiritual lottery.
We have at our disposal
Teshuvah - repentance (to heal our relationships),
Tefillah - prayer (to grow as human beings and become closer to God),
and tzedakah - charity (to give when we can and receive when we need, to help make the world a more just and holy place).

Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving avert the severity of any decree –even hunger, even homelessness, even illness, even death.

But here is the kicker: for this lottery, you have to be present to win. Present to good and to suffering.

I want to revisit the words with which I opened this drash. I chose them carefully and wrote them down. They are perfectly true. I hope you will hear them with an even deeper excitement, this second time around.

Craig and I have won the lottery. [you have, too]

We won't NEED to worry about money for the rest of our lives. [*Yidden* [news flash:]--worrying is voluntary – and we will all cope with whatever happens, financially]

We have been busily thinking of all the wonderful things we will do together. [Absolutely true] The FAMILY time. [there is nothing more precious] The travel [if we can't go far, we can always travel to some of the most beautiful vacation destinations in the world, right here in Southern California].

We look forward to the enhancement of our home. [which can be done with and without money] But nothing is more delightful to us than making a tzedakah plan, assigning resources to people and causes that deserve it – and need us. [True. And therefore we will give *whatever* funds we can, and donate our time and talents, as well]]

You can be sure that Makom Ohr Shalom is at the top of our list. [Always]

Now many of you know that Craig has also had some DIFFICULT news, lately, about his health. And nothing has changed that. Yet, just knowing that we have won the lottery [spiritually speaking], gives me an extra measure of hope. I feel somehow that life will be easier, that we'll be able to handle whatever comes our way -- with Craig's health or anything else. [Standing before my husband, my in-laws, and my two loud children in the next room, and this treasured community, I do feel that we have ALL won the lottery]

It's a siman tov and a mazal tov. A good sign of a good destiny. Yehh lanu ulechol ysirael. May it be thus for us and for all the people of Israel, and for the whole world.

Amen. [[Sing siman tov umazel tov]]

SHARE IN DIADS

Take just a few moments of silence. Afterwards, please share with a neighbor:

In what ways have you won the lottery, and what do you intend to do differently with this year's winnings?

- Last year, I gave a sermon entitled "Thank God I Can Sin." I thought that my theme was free will and that my hook was the "shock" (goodness, gracious) that I had contemplated eating treif. However, as I delivered the sermon, I realized that my subconscious was smarter than I was. The true drama was not my "confession" but my father – who was wheeled in and had horribly and obviously deteriorated from ALS in the intervening year. If he had free will, then we all did. He was the sermon. I added a few words. The DRAFT follows:

5773 Thank God, I Can Sin

Shana Tova. [Shana Tova]

We just wished each other a good, new year. And wishing is a wonderful custom, a blessing we offer to one another. But wishing won't make it so.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year begins, but that is just the calendar. It is up to us whether 5773 will actually be a *new* year – Or whether it will just be an undifferentiated continuation of the past.

It is OUR choice if we will be rejuvenated by the Holiday.

Whether or not we are renewed depends on us -- our focus, our intention and our spiritual work.

Whether this will be a good year depends on us, too.

All this was driven home to me in a surprising way about a week ago, when I was driving north on the NJ Turnpike, returning from my parents home in Essex County. I passed a sign that I have seen dozens of times, but hardly really noticed. It announces a rest stop with symbols and logos that indicate the vendors there. I have never stopped there; I am usually driving just a short distance. The first time I drove this route, I did take note that Starbucks is not one of the vendors – THAT could have induced me to stop. I, noticed, too, that Burger King was one of the vendors, and some part of my brain always registers, "Treif" – not kosher – when I see that sign. Last week, for the first time, I noticed that Nathan's Hot Dogs was listed, too. Who knows why I happened to register that fact. Maybe it was because Craig had taken the kids to Coney Island. It was a fraction of a second of recognition, as I traveled 70 mph on the freeway. And then, immediately following the awareness of Nathan's came the thought: also treif. I am reconstructing my train of thought so minutely, because of the next, startling thought that came into my head. I said to myself. You know, I COULD stop. I could eat a hot dog.

I was shocked at the thought! I have never deliberately eaten anything unkosher in my life. Maybe my passing thought doesn't strike you as earth shattering. This RH, The Rabbi confessed to thinking of eating treif. Whoo-hoo. There's something to talk around the water cooler. Frankly, It isn't that juicy of a story. I didn't actually have a yen for something unkosher. What I HAD was an awareness that I had a CHOICE. That I could depart from my Prior CHOICES. That I was truly FREE.

If I were forced to give up every ritual commandment, the last one I could part with would be kashrut. I love being reminded of my connection to God and the Jewish people in the way I cook and eat. I wrote an article called Why Be Kosher, and kashrut one of my favorite things to talk about. Yet, I COULD eat a non-kosher Nathan's hot dog. I DIDN'T, [hands up] but I COULD.

I am free to choose. And if I am free to choose the unexpected and the unprecedented in this area, I can make all sorts of OTHER new choices. And so can you.

We translate teshuvah as repentance, but lashoov also means to return and to turn. Teshuvah means that we can TURN on a dime, we can, in the words of Elijah the prophet, TURN our hearts around. In short, we can change.

I gave this sermon a title, as I was writing. I call it “Thank God, I can sin.” And I mean it. Thank God! Because if it true that I can sin, and I REALLY know that, then I can also repent, I can also forgive. I CHOOSE of my own free will. And I can choose differently at any point.

Those of you who were here last night heard me talk about a question that God asks that Elijah: Ma lecha pho, eliyahu? What are you doing here Elijah?

And that is the very question I want to pose to you right now. Ma lechem po? What are you doing here?

I am getting some quizzical looks. It’s Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi. This is the time of year we come to shul.

At the risk of reducing attendance tomorrow, [[I want to acknowledge that]] you don’t HAVE to come. I am delighted that you are here, I encourage you to attend tomorrow, but it is your CHOICE – and that is important to know and to feel.

You may have been invited, pressured, or cajoled to come to shul,
but ultimately don’t come because anyone “made” you
You don’t come because the guilt or habit is [dramatic!] too deeply ingrained to be brooked
You are here,
with all the reasons pro and con,
with all the enticements to attend
and all the temptations not to,
[you are here] because You CHOSE to be here.

And since you have CHOSEN to fill your seat, you may as well CHOOSE to fill your soul.

It’s UP to YOU.

Rabbi AJ Heschel famously said, “In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” That is why we recite the confessional in the plural. Because if you are free and especially if you UNDERSTAND and KNOW DEEP IN YOUR GUT that you are free, then you will hold yourself accountable for the choices you make. You are responsible for YOUR part in any argument, for YOUR role as a citizen, for the small offenses and large atrocities that YOU tolerate. You are responsible for failing to do and be better. That’s the Bad news.

The good news is: If you are FREE – and ONLY if you are free -- then you are FREE to change.

Maybe you have had a Nathan’s hot dog moment – a time when you realized you COULD do ANYthing. You could turn your back on what you had chosen. Or You could turn your heart around and choose it all over again. You could make a change – and a RADICAL change – in any direction. If you stop and dwell in the stark awareness of your own freedom, it’s un-nerving – and also exciting.

If we really ARE free, then NO ONE IS SAFE.

Just because you have a good life up until today, doesn’t mean you will make moral or wise choices from now on.

And if we are really free, then No ONE IS TRAPPED.
 Just because you have made poor choices in the past, doesn't mean you must continue to do so.

Goodness is a moment-by-moment achievement.

It is understandable that people want to escape this kind of pressure.
 So we DENY our power to choose.

When we hurt people we sometimes say things like:
 I didn't mean to do it!!

I don't know how this happened.

But in all likelihood, no one put a gun to your head. And, though you may not understand all your own motivations, you ACTED on them.

I have a friend in Los Angeles, who is an extraordinary therapist. Over the years, I referred a great many people to her. She has helped a lot of couples stay married, even folks who came to her on the brink of divorce. She told me once that there is only one thing that gets her angry as a therapist. She can't tolerate it if a partner who has had an affair explains it by saying, "It just happened."

I can understand banning that phrase, because It DIDN'T "just happen." That statement is insulting to everyone:

It's dismissive to the spouse who was betrayed.

It's objectifying of the person with whom the offending spouse had an affair.

And, most of all, it's demeaning to the spouse who strayed. No one is so empty-headed, or so devoid of self-will, that they could be led into an affair without their awareness, volition and active participation.

No matter WHAT the sin, misdeeds don't just happen.

Nor do grudges and unforgiveness "just happen "
 naturally and inexorably
 and outside of our control.

In each case, someone chooses.

There may be temptations or insults,
 but someone responds to them in a hurtful way.

Today, each of us looks in the mirror of the machzor and says

I am that someone. ///

Painful as that realization is, it is also liberating. Because responsibility is the pre-requisite for change.

Power comes when we say, I could have things differently,
 AND, I still can.

Isaac Bashevis Singer said of this issue of human freedom. "We must believe in free will. We have no choice."

It's a great line, but the truth is: You DO Have a choice. You can reject this message.

You can declare that you DON'T have free will.

That you are controlled by circumstances.

That the deeds and misdeeds of others have constrained you.

That your brain chemistry is your destiny.

You can find lots of evidence that you are not free.

That, my friends, is your choice.

I don't mean to be flip or dismissive. I am trying to make the point, that NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO us, we still have the ability to choose our attitude and our response.

My father is here today. I have always admired his many wonderful qualities, but in the last two years, he has become a hero to me. Did he CHOOSE to have ALS? Absolutely NOT. And I don't want to deny the fact that there are many things in your life that you didn't choose, either.

The world is full of tragedies, accidents, random suffering, terrorist attacks – all sorts of things over which WE as individuals have little or no control. ALS came unbidden and undeserved. And when it is cured, all of humanity will say, “Good riddance.”

But SINCE my dad contracted this unwanted disease, he and my mother have made hundreds and hundreds of choices. They have used every BIT of the control they DO have. They made

The choice to stay in their home

The choice to hire Ernie as their caregiver

The choice not to complain

The choice to invite people to visit

My dad made the choice to keep playing chess, even though he can't move the pieces anymore

He has made the choice to keep listening to books and making jokes and connecting with his grandchildren.

My parents made the choice to come and join us here today – though it is both physically and psychically draining for them. That's because, long before this illness, they made a global life choice always to opt for community and celebration, even when it costs something.

No matter what life hands us, the quality of our lives is shaped by how we CHOOSE to respond.

Viktor Frankel, the well-known psychiatrist who survived Aushwitz, refined his theory of human motivation in the concentration camp. He wrote in his classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” Even in a concentration camp, people could choose their attitude. Even in a concentration camp they were utterly FREE in that respect. The Nazis chose hate, evil, oppression, torment, inhumanity. That created all sorts of REAL and HORRIFIC consequences for their victims. But the prisoners STILL had their OWN choice to make. Ask any survivor.

The Shabbat before RH, we always read The Torah portion Nitzavim, which includes these words: “I call heaven and earth to witness this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your children may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19). *Uvacharta vachayyim, lema'*

[[I never fail to be moved by this holy plea from God to humanity.]]

The Torah is asking us to imagine that at any given moment, each choice we make is inclining us either toward life and vitality or toward death and destruction. [sarcasm] No pressure.

Right before RH, we are reminded: the CHOICE is ours.

Forgiveness or anger.

Repentance or sin.

Growth or excuses.

We have some decisions to make.

The great Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, whose teachings we studied LAST High Holidays, gave many long discourses and told stories that lasted up to three days. (And you thought High Holiday services were

long.) When Reb Nachman was asked by a student about free will, he gave an unusually short reply. He elaborated slightly, but his initial answer was just three words, “Mi Sherotzeh oseh.”

One who wants, does.

People who REALLY want something, do it.

Initially, this may sound punitive or unrealistic.

Aren't there plenty of people who desperately want to END something bad in their lives or fervently wish they could begin something good, who can't seem to make it happen?

They – we -- want to make a change, but somehow, year after year, we don't.

Yet, mi sherotzeh, oseh. We can all testify that there were times when we had a TRUE and DEEP and URGENT desire, and then we made the behavioral choices necessary to get us where we wanted to go.

The person who acts isn't necessarily the one with the most talent, or the best education, or the most connections. It is the person who WANTS it BADLY enough.

We have all known someone who wanted for years to make a change. They couldn't, they couldn't. And then suddenly, they could. Sometimes there is a ready explanation for a sudden breakthrough. A knew a woman who COULDN'T quit smoking, despite dozens of attempts. Then, one day, she found out she was pregnant, and she never picked up another cigarette. She has a greater rotzeh, a greater reason and to desire change than ever before, and her oseh, her behavior, followed. But the ability to trace causality is rare. More often, the triggers for our breakthroughs are as mysterious to us as those for our resistance. ///

It's disappointing and painful to realize that we haven't been able to make the changes we say we want. And every human being faces that realization at one time or another. Reb Nachman isn't criticizing or piling on. He is offering a prescription. To exercise your free will effectively, fall in love with your goals. Remember not just THAT you have a choice, but WHY you choose what you do. What do you REALLY want – what will serve your DEEPEST desires over the long term? Choose what connects you to your soul, choose what you believe in, choose what is in harmony with your purpose, -- in short, -- choose life, and your success is assured.

But please don't misunderstand. Nachman is not making any guarantees about the success of your OUTCOME. No one can promise that. He is saying that if you come to know and love the motivations and meaning behind your choices, then you can count on yourself to follow through. The success of your PROCESS is assured, even if the outcome is not. You will be oseh. You will DO, you will ACT, you will move forward, you will make a difference in the world. And then the results will be what they will be. Sometimes you will achieve just what you were aiming for, and sometimes not.

We don't and can't control the myriad forces in the universe. We have come together over the course of the high holidays to see if we can learn to control just one person (ourselves). The High Holidays are an exercise in free will. And Free will means nothing more and nothing less than DIRECTING your own will. //

All the ideas I have been talking about today are reflected in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. There are some things we do not control. Thus we chant: who will live and who will die? who by earthquake and who by fire? who will die young, and who will grow old? who will be humbled, and who exalted?

But there are some things we do control. That's why uteshuvah, utefillah, utzedakah ma'avirin et roa hagezeyra. In the face of anything FATE seems to hand us,

-- any sorrow or any blessing -,

we can choose repentance, prayer, righteous giving. We can choose Torah. We can choose Life. We choose how to respond.

Some of us get into trouble when we over-estimate what is in our power to control. But almost all of us under-estimate the life-changing power we wield – when we choose how to respond to what Life hands us.

[[You can choose, and you can change.]]

The brilliant physicist, Steven Hawking, suffers, like my dad, from ALS. He can't speak, move, or breathe on his own, so he knows a thing or two about NOT being in control. This is what he said about the balance between FATE// and FREEDOM.

[It's very technical, so listen carefully]

"I have noticed," he said, "that even people who claim everything is predestined, and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road."

Before we cross into 5773, let's hold hands and look both ways– toward fate on the one side and free will on the other. Let's remember what is still and always up to us.

We have more power than we sometimes like to admit.

Thank God, we can sin. And thank God, we can choose not to.

Reb Nachman offered these words of encouragement:

"If you believe that you can damage, then believe that you can fix.
If you believe that you can harm, then believe that you can heal."

This year, may each of us realize the choices that are before us,
and may we choose LIFE every time.

Amen.

Now, let's ask again: how do we prepare ourselves?

One answer, I believe, lies in the wisdom of Nachman quoted in the sermon, just above. We have to fall in love again with our rabbinate, remember why we chose this path, and find our motivation and inspiration to "do" from that place.

In addition to these resources, some of my favorite quotations, commentaries, and meditations for the High Holidays are available at RabbiDebra.com/jewish-holidays.html.

Shana Tova!