

The Orchard

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FINDING THE HOLY IN THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

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How do we find “the holy” in the High Holy Days?

The tradition teaches us that three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: one for the iniquitous (*resha'im*), one for the just (*tzadikim*), and one for those in the middle (*beinonim*). The *tzadikim* are immediately inscribed and sealed for life—they are overflowing with life-giving qualities; the *resha'im* are immediately inscribed and sealed for death—they have forsaken all but the dead or dying parts of themselves. The *beinonim*—those who are facing death but want to live—are carried over from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur and, if they merit it by their *teshuvah* (returning), they are inscribed for life; otherwise they are inscribed for death. Most of us fit the last category—we are “in the middle.”

Most of us carry dead parts of ourselves that we want to bring back to life. Most of us at some time weep alone for our missteps. There are moments when we explode in anger and regret it, take what doesn't belong to us and are pained by conscience, speak ill of others but feel queasy doing it, and so on. One way or another, we do damage to ourselves and to others. And we occasionally long for wisdom, meaning, or contentment, notwithstanding our worldly accomplishments and material acquisitions.

This is the time of year when everything is arranged for us as Jews to jettison all that is dead and dying within us, and to nurture all that is alive and life-giving. It's a unique opportunity to cease being what we find repulsive in ourselves and to become what we have always idealized as right and good. It's a time when we may choose to make ourselves *holy*, which in its essence requires that we renounce all that destroys life and commit ourselves to be at one with the Source of Life. The High Holy Days are an opening to return to the essence of our soul, to the unique part of each one of us that has

been created in the image of God's life-giving goodness. The immediate reward for making our way through that opening can be that we truly experience Days of Awe. It's possible in this way, in the midst of our mundane existence, to experience a resurgence of spiritual energy that has the potential to sustain us day to day throughout the coming year as we strive upwards toward God.

To have an experience of awe isn't possible, however, without a significant commitment on our part. In fact, we may be in awe of what it takes to turn our life, because awe isn't the result of heartfelt prayer, ecstatic music and dancing, or a charismatic prayer leader. The preparation for such an experience begins during the month of Elul, which is the time set aside for us as Jews to begin reviewing who we are, what we're doing, and how we're doing it, to consider who we've wronged and how we've wronged them, and to right the wrongs we've done.

What are some things we can do before the High Holy Days to prepare ourselves for an awesome experience of finding holiness?

We suggest the following approach: For each of the days leading up to and including the High Holy Days, select one of the sets of questions from the list below (or from a comparable list). Write the questions on a slip of paper and refer to them a half-dozen times throughout the day, allowing the contemplation of them to dominate your thoughts whenever possible.

- Am I satisfied with the way I'm living my life, the person I've become? What would I answer if a booming voice from heaven confronted me with the question, “What do you think you're doing down there with the life I've given you?”

- What has been the quality of love that I've given and received this past year? Have I been willing or not to invest myself in the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical intimacy that's needed to sustain love?
- What have I learned and what have I taught this past year? Have I accepted or ignored the obligation to be a lifelong learner, growing in my capacity to co-produce the world with God, and the corresponding obligation to teach others what I've been given the opportunity to learn?
- How would my community be different if all of us we're committed to the vision and path of Torah? Has my relationship with my community been as a passive consumer of social and religious services or an active producer of a commonwealth of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness?
- What has been the effect of my work in the world, both in terms of the individuals I've touched personally and the ripple effects my work has had? Have I made doing *well*—acquiring position, possessions, prestige, and power—the exclusive purpose of my work in the world, or have I made doing *good* my highest priority, using the gifts I've been given to create more of God's goodness in the world?

The actions necessary to achieve *teshuvah* are usually uncomplicated, although often onerous and painful, both for others and ourselves, at least initially. Often we must dredge up the past to apologize, make amends, and ask forgiveness. And there is a temptation to avoid this work, to tell ourselves that we'll do it next week, next month, or next year, although occasionally we get a rude awakening when the person we've wronged leaves this world unexpectedly, abandoning us with an unresolved ache of self-doubt and self-loathing.

If we have begun this work to achieve holiness, what might be our spiritual and emotional "posture" as we enter the Days of Awe?

It ought not to be one of affected piety, sadness, or gloominess. We need not be self-conscious, implicitly imagining that somehow we're unique in our need to

turn our life, when in fact we're not the exception but the rule. We would do better to imagine ourselves walking with the entire Jewish people to the well of our tradition for a long, refreshing draught of a life-affirming drink, one that has the power to renew, not only our head, heart and spirit, but our body too. Turning our life for the sake of living fully rather than half-heartedly has the power potentially to drain away all that drags us down, from the cognitive dissonance in our head to the tension in our neck and back, and reaching even to the excess of cellulite in our bellies and buttocks.

Once we have entered the New Year, however, during the ten-day period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, especially during prayer services, we may recognize that at times it's not possible to maintain our *kavvanah*, to focus our spiritual intention continuously. But there's no need to become discouraged because exhaustion or boredom, distraction or disillusionment sets in at some points during Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur services. *Teshuvah* is a process, not an event, and it remains possible—it may simply be more difficult to achieve than we had initially imagined.

It may be helpful then to take a break, step away from the services mentally, or even physically as well, and *spiritually* scan our surroundings and their meaning—looking for and regarding the loved ones God has created and allowed to us, looking at and regarding others within the community whose commitment to loving-kindness and justice in the image of God is unstinting, and looking for and regarding the beauty of nature that has been given to us as a gift by our Creator. It's often useful to remind ourselves of why we want to turn our life, as a way of focusing our intention and commitment to do so.

As we anticipate the coming opportunity for holiness, let's allow ourselves to be uplifted. This can be a time for hope and joy about the possibilities for each of us to play our part in transforming our own life, our family, our friends, our congregation, and our community.

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