



## Readers' Compendium for

# Rosh Hashanah

- Identifying Your Life's Mission.....Sara Yoheved Rigler
- 6 Steps to Fulfilling Your Dreams.....Azriel Hirsh Friedman
- My Moment of Weakness.....Yael Mermelstein
- Revolutionary Shofar.....Rabbi Tzvi Gluckin
- It's a Wonderful Life.....Rabbi Benjamin Blech
- Climbing to the Top.....Emuna Braverman
- ABCs of Rosh Hashanah .....Aish.com

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## Identifying Your Life's Mission

by Sara Yoheved Rigler

**This year, electrify your life with purpose.**

After six months of working for the company, it's time for your evaluation. You walk into the boardroom, where three designer-suit-clad personnel managers are sitting behind a mahogany desk. The one on the left scans your file, looks up at you accusingly, and says, "I see here that you did not report for work at 9 am one time during this entire period."

The woman in the middle shakes her head and remarks, "This is a Fortune 500 Company. Instead of a jacket and tie, you report for work wearing jeans."

The man on the right stares at the papers in his hand and says grimly, "Our surveillance cameras show that you spend less than 10% of your working hours at your desk. The rest of the time you're walking around the building."

The first evaluator shoots the question: "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yes," you reply with confidence, "I was hired as the night watchman."

Rosh Hashanah is a time of evaluation. But to accurately assess your performance this year, you have to know your job description. Judaism asserts that every soul comes into this world charged with a unique, positive purpose.

According to the great 16th century Kabbalistic master known as the Arizal, no one has ever or will ever come into this world with the exact same mission as yours. The light you are meant to shine into the world is yours alone, as individual as your fingerprint, as personal as your voiceprint.

Your mission can be interpersonal, such as counseling couples with troubled marriages, or scholarly, such as researching ancient Chinese culture, or an expression of your talent, such as painting landscapes or playing the violin. It can be concrete, such as establishing a home for Alzheimer's patients, or abstract, such as manifesting in the world the Divine attribute of truth or patience. It can be on a large scale, such as inaugurating the recycling system in your city, or on a small scale, such as caring for your handicapped child with joy. You may have two, or at most, three different missions, which can be consecutive (after finishing one job you start another) or simultaneous. Yet, even if there are 500 marriage counselors in your city, your particular approach and way of helping people is unique. Not one of us can be replaced – ever.

### Identifying Your Mission

Imagine you are an undercover agent sent into Iran. You've had years of training, have two vital contacts in Tehran, and are equipped with the latest hi-tech spy gadgetry. Only one thing is lacking: You have no idea what your mission is.

Many of us go through life like that: We follow the route laid out by society: going to college, finding a job, getting married, raising a family, but with no clear sense of the unique mission entrusted to us. We are pulled in many different directions, feeling compromised in what we do and guilty for what we don't do. Identifying our mission is, according to Rabbi Aryeh Nivin, the first step in leading a life of vibrancy and joy. "When you intersect with your life's purpose," he explains, "you feel excitement."

Knowing your personal mission is essential preparation for Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah God apportions to each of us life, health, livelihood, and everything else. What is your plan for how you propose to use the life God

gives you? The CEO is not going to dole out a million-dollar budget to an employee who doesn't have a carefully worked out proposal.

We are used to praying for life, health, and livelihood as ends in themselves. In the Divine accounting, however, life, health, and livelihood are simply the tools – the hi-tech spy gadgetry – that will enable you to accomplish your mission.

Rabbi Nivin offers two methods for discovering your mission:

- Ask yourself (and write down): What were the five or ten most pleasurable moments in my life?
- Ask yourself: If I inherited a billion dollars and had six hours a day of discretionary time, what would I do with the time and money?

When answering the first question, eliminate the universal transcendent moments, such as witnessing the beauty of nature or listening to music. Your mission, of course, may have to do with nature or music, but on a much more individual level than the high all people feel when they see the Grand Canyon. Although your mission may require hard work or genuine sacrifice, when you are engaged in your life's mission you experience, as Rabbi Nivin puts it, "This feels so good that I could do it all day long."

When I did the first exercise, these are the answers I came up with:

- When someone in my Johannesburg audience came up after I spoke and told my son, "Your mother's words changed my life."
- When someone tells me, "Your book changed my life."

- When reading the comments to my Aish.com articles, I see, "This was exactly what I needed to read today." When I see that the reader's way of thinking or acting is impacted by what I wrote.

- When someone passing through Israel (often on the way to India) comes to talk to me about Judaism, and two or five or ten years later I find out that they stayed in Jerusalem, starting learning Torah, and are observing the mitzvot.

- When my children mention that they talked to God about something bothering them and I realize that their relationship with God is strong.

The common theme that emerged for me was that my mission is: "To inspire people, through writing and speaking, to move forward in their spiritual/personal development and relationship with God." That's what excites and energizes me. That's why, to my friends' amazement, when I am lecture touring, I can speak in five different cities in five days, waking up at dawn every day to make an early flight and giving a three-hour workshop twice a day, and, at 63 years old, never feel tired. Knowing my mission is like installing an energy pack in my life.

Barbara Silverstein is a wife, mother, and hospice nurse. When talking to me recently about her "life's mission," she shrugged. Although her personal and professional lives are fraught with difficulties, she soldiers on with dedication and integrity. I asked her what she would do if she had loads of money and six hours a day of discretionary time. Barbara thought for a few minutes, then replied with passion: "I would set up a Jewish outreach center for the elderly. In my work with the terminally ill, I'm always facing men or women who are about to lose their spouse and they say to me, 'I don't know what I'll do about the funeral. I don't have a rabbi.' They want a spiritual connection with their Jewish roots,

but they're clueless about how to do it." The more that Barbara talked, the more fervent she became.

"So that's your mission," I told her, "to establish a Jewish outreach center for the elderly. That's real pioneering work. No one else has done it."

"Are you kidding?" Barbara replied. "Between my family and my work, I don't have time for anything else."

Remembering Rabbi Nivin's advice, I suggested: "Take a half hour twice a week, and sit down with a pen and paper, and just start brainstorming. Write down whatever comes to your mind, what the first steps would be, and what you want it to look like in the end. And ask the Almighty for help in making it happen. He can give you whatever He deems you should have. And then see if the opportunity to take the next step emerges."

Two weeks later, Barbara phoned me, brimming with excitement. "This has really gotten my imagination going," she effused. "Everything I've learned throughout my life is coming in handy with this plan. I don't know if it'll ever amount to anything, but just thinking about it is like an electrical charge in my whole day. My husband and kids ask me why I'm smiling so much."

The Creator has outfitted you with a unique set of aptitudes, talents, and interests perfectly suited to what you are charged with accomplishing. By following your inclinations and abilities, you may already have found your mission. Sometimes your mission is deposited in your lap, such as the birth of a special needs child. The National Tay-Sachs Association, for example, was founded by the parents of children suffering from Tay-Sachs; the parents' daunting challenge metamorphosed into their life's mission.

If your mission is not yet clear to you, take a half hour between now and Rosh Hashanah and reflect on, "What

do I really want to do with my life?" Perhaps you work full time developing software for Microsoft, but you've always felt a tug to write a book about internet addiction. Perhaps your greatest pleasure is tending your vegetable garden in suburban Detroit, but you've always dreamed of living on an agricultural settlement in Israel. Such inner urges may be whisperings from God, the secret message from Headquarters disclosing your true mission.

## **Guilt, Respect, Validation**

Clarity about your mission dissipates guilt for all the worthy endeavors you're NOT engaged in. Once you realize that you're in this world to develop a new healing modality for autism, you won't feel guilty that you're not volunteering for the local soup kitchen or marching on the U.N. to protest anti-Israel discrimination.

Once I identified my mission, I stopped feeling guilty that I really don't like to cook for myriads of Shabbat guests. I also understood why I love writing for Aish.com and its spiritually upwardly mobile readers.

The concept of each person having an individual life's mission is a key to respecting other people. Otherwise, you may feel that what's important to you should be important to everyone. You're an environmental activist? You may blame your sister for being oblivious to the environment without appreciating that her mission is to fight Holocaust denial. You belong to a group that feeds the homeless? You may find it reprehensible that that other group is apparently heedless to the homeless and spends all their time in pro-Israel activism on campus. Being able to say, "This is my mission and that is theirs," is the gateway to true tolerance and respect.

Knowing your individual mission validates your life and releases you from the pernicious habit of comparing yourself to others. Jonah Salk's mark on the world may seem as deep as a crater while your taking care of your

handicapped brother may seem like a fingernail impression, but from a spiritual perspective the light you are shining into the world is unique and is exactly the light you came here to radiate.

One more point: Fulfilling your individual life's mission does not exempt you from your global missions, such as supporting your family or raising your children. Starting an outreach center for the elderly may have to wait until your children are grown. Writing that book on internet addiction may have to be tucked into your few spare hours after your full-time job. Don't worry. The God who assigned you your mission will make sure you have everything you need—including time now or later—to fulfill it.

So when the shofar sounds this Rosh Hashanah and you stand for your annual evaluation, be prepared to declare, "This is my job, and I'm working on it."



## 6 Steps to Fulfilling Your Dreams

by Azriel Hirsh Friedman

### A practical system to prepare for Rosh Hashanah.

Ever dig and find a natural spring? You have to break through hard ground, move away all the rocks and – after great work – the thirsty ground becomes damp. Dig deeper and you uncover a beautiful underground stream that washes away everything in its path.

This is the way we prepare for Rosh Hashanah. The earth and rocks are the obstacles – bad habits, unrealistic planning, incorrect beliefs, negative character traits – that keep us from feeling truly alive. This is the time of year to

tap into our deepest yearning to live, in order to stand before the Creator on Rosh Hashanah and ask for another year of life.

Here are 6 Steps to help us break through to that overflowing spring – and fulfill our dreams this year.

### Step #1 – What Are Your Inner Strengths?

Below, write 6 experiences in your life where you felt great about yourself. Next to each experience, write the emotion you felt. Next to the emotion, list two strengths you used to accomplish that experience.

Here are two samples:

Experience	Feeling	Strengths Used
Collected 25,000 signatures on a petition	exhilaration	organization, creativity
Consoled my friend who was mourning	hope	sensitivity, compassion

Now fill in the chart yourself:

	Experience	Feeling	Strengths Used
1			
2			
3			
4			

5			
6			

Look over your feelings. Do you see a common theme?

Review the strengths you listed above. Pause to appreciate those strengths with which you were blessed. If other situations where you used these strengths come to mind, write those down as well.

## Step #2 – Identify Your Dreams

Our lives are cluttered with dreams that have died, left abandoned as life swept us on. All our dreams – even the silly ones – contain a point of our deepest yearning to unabashedly invest our heart and soul into life.

Below, list 10 dreams or life ideals that you believe in.

We are complex people, so remember to check all the different parts of yourself for their dreams as well – i.e. “you” as a friend, a parent, a Jew, a member of society, a pleasure seeker, a giver, etc.)

	Dream / Life Ideal
SAMPLE	To have a really great marriage.
1	
2	
3	
4	

5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

Now look at this list and ask: Why have so many of my dreams gone unfulfilled?

## Step #3 – Support from Above

You may believe in God, but are you aware that God believes in you?

Appreciate that God created you with a unique set of talents (see your own list above) and placed before you endless opportunities to use and refine them. He invested those strengths inside of you, and believes in your ability to actualize your deepest dreams of what life could be.

Below are some challenges and misconceptions that hold us back. As you read each one, take a look inside yourself to see how they may apply to you.

**Mistake #1:** We think we are supposed to be perfect; therefore we mistakenly hide our flaws.

**Truth #1:** God created us with flaws. God also gave us the strengths to overcome those challenges. This is a vital part of our task to perfect our world. As long as we hide from our flaws, we are in denial. Only by accepting that they are part of us and loving ourselves despite them, can we begin to change and grow. By giving ourselves some patience and understanding, we are emulating the One above, allowing Him to have mercy on us to allow us to grow. Our strengths also give us encouragement in the

face of the flaws we cannot change. They allow us to carry them gracefully, and enable others to see us in a more positive light.

**Mistake #2:** We try to be someone else. We identify with people we admire and actually think we can become them. This is destructive because in the process, we begin to reject parts of ourselves. It causes us to abandon issues that are vital to our unique purpose in the world. If they don't matter to you, then to whom should they matter? If you don't make your dreams come true, who will?

**Truth #2:** Your job in the world can only be achieved if you are passionate about "you." First you have to get to know and like yourself, and that takes patience. You can learn and be inspired by others – but your question should *not* be, "How can I be like him?" Rather, you should ask, "How can I use my own strengths, as passionately as that person uses his?" Little by little you will see that by being "you," you're able to accomplish things you never dreamed the limits of your nature would allow.

**Mistake #3:** I will change automatically.

**Truth #3:** Automatically, you will remain stuck in the same rut. None of your life ideals will ever become realized. Life will push you along, burying your dreams and hopes of who you could have been; and the only person to blame is the person who never made the decision to consciously change. "I'll change it tomorrow" means "I will never change." A decision to work on yourself has to begin now.

Any businessperson plans, researches, and schedules in order to achieve profitable goals. As long as we regard our own goals as a waste of time, we cannot change. We have given up on ourselves. The importance of anything in your life is reflected by two questions:

1) Did I set aside time to do it / learn about it / think about it?

2) Am I willing to set aside time for this on a regular basis?

**Mistake #4:** I know I could fail, so why try?

**Truth #4:** Failure is the building block of success. Even with a promise of success from God, Moses failed miserably when he first tried to take the Jews from Egypt. To get out of the place you are stuck, you will unquestionably fail. More than once. Don't worry. It's often just God's way of testing how much you believe in your own dreams, helping you to clarify, re-evaluate and perfect them. We are judged only on our effort and never on our success. Jewish success is to be able to know for yourself: "I am doing everything in my power to put in my most sincere effort to succeed."

The next time you are frustrated, say:

- "I welcome the frustration, because it is God's sign of confidence that I can grow."
- "Please, God, help me overcome this."

## Step #4 – Personal Blocks

Now let's talk about all those nasty rocks that get in our way of digging down to the flowing spring. On the road to any meaningful goal, we will inevitably encounter frustrations and challenges. Very often, the frustration appears in the place where we most desire to grow. For example, someone who desperately wants to fall in love may be blocking their own chances to meet their soul mate. By recognizing the challenge, we can confront it head-on, and remove the obstacle. Let it flow!

- List below four frustrating things in your life right now.
- Note in what way God may be sending this to help you.



	Frustration/Challenge	God may be sending this to help me...
SAM- PLE	I was fired from my job.	Now I have time to travel. This may help me overcome my fear of change, and ultimately lead me to a much better job.
1		
2		
3		
4		

## Step #5 – Dreams Do Come True

At this point, go back to your “dream list” that you created in Step-2.

- Choose your most three important dreams, and list them in order of importance to you.
- Under each dream, write three steps that you will need to accomplish each dream, in the order that you would need to do them.
- Next to each step, write how many months/years it will take, and how much time each week it will take.
- After each, write a summary statement.

Dream	Three Steps to Accomplish	How much time it will take:	Summary Statement
Find my soul mate	1) Set aside time to figure out who I am, so I know what type of spouse I want.  2) Review mistakes I have made in the past, and learn wisdom about how to be the best spouse.  3) Network with friends and family, to locate my soul mate.	1) 20 min/day for 3 months  2) 30 min/day for 3 months  3) 20 min/day for 3 months	If I do this, within a year I will have done all I can to help God bring me my soul mate.

Choose a friend or mentor who knows you well and has good judgment. Read to them your steps and ask if they are realistic. If not, adjust accordingly.



## Step #6 – The Rosh Hashanah Letter

Rosh Hashanah is when it all comes together. We stand before God and present our plan for the year. The day before Rosh Hashanah, write a letter to the Infinite One who wants to give you as much life as you are possibly able to receive. Include in this letter:

- The dreams of who you want to be.
- Thank Him for the gifts He has given you, and tell Him how you plan to use them effectively to pursue your dreams.
- Ask Him for help in using your strengths and overcoming your frustrations.
- End with a statement of your trust in Him – that He desires your success, that He has been helping you, and that He will continue to do so.

If you go through these 7 Steps, you can feel confident that you have made an honest effort, and with great joy you can stand before God on Rosh Hashanah to ask for another year of life.



## My Moment of Weakness

Yael Mermelstein

### Do you want God to cut you some slack?

"Quiet!" I yelled in the middle of the supermarket parking lot. My children froze. "I'm sick and tired of all your complaining!" I continued, after surreptitiously glancing left and right to make sure I didn't have an audience, my decibel level still very robust.

My son looked at me, his face suddenly mellowed by surprise as he straddled his bike in the middle of the parking lot. My two other children that were with me kept their eyes peeled to the asphalt. In the background I heard the squeak of a shopping cart. I didn't even want to turn around to see some smartly dressed woman with her angelic entourage in tow, or some beaming father holding on to his son's hand as they crossed the parking lot. What would they think of me?

No, I wanted to tell whoever it is that is witnessing this scene. You've got it all wrong.

You see, we were at the tippy end of an idyllic vacation in Moshav Mattityahu, a pastoral and family friendly community in the middle of Israel. The mostly deserted streets were lined by verdant lawns, quaint cottages set back from the road and bikes strewn through the front yards like tossed candy wrappers.

We had come with our family for three nights. In the sultry mornings we had flipped on the air conditioner and stayed put, playing Rummikub and War and snacking on forbidden sugar cereals. In the afternoons we cooled down with swimming or boating. And in the evenings we barbecued on our porch, the older children fanning the flames while the younger ones slathered their hot dogs with ketchup and bit into half cooked French fries.

At least that's the way the kids would describe it. If you read between the lines, in the sultry mornings the kids bickered and fought over sugar cereal portions they were not used to eating. In the afternoons the kids fought as they baked in the sun while we walked to the swimming pool (why can't we just take a taxi like all the normal families do??) In the evenings the little ones clamored to fan the barbecue flames while the older ones told me how ridiculous it was that I'd put the barbecue sauce on the kebobs before we put them on the grill.

But I knew my children wouldn't remember it that way, and neither would I. Because packed in between the soccer balls, the inner tubes and the bicycles, I had stuffed our suitcases with whopping doses of patience. So I had managed to ignore the bickering. And I had risen above the insulting comments to this family my husband and I worked so hard to cultivate. I had settled the barbecue fights as amicably as possible. And a good time was had by all.

And now, in the very last moments of the vacation, we couldn't find the bus stop where we were meant to meet my husband and the rest of the kids. And as the sun massaged our scalps and I ran after my children on their bikes to reach the bus stop, the complaining struck a dissonant chord.

"Who takes two busses home from a vacation when they have three bikes with them?"

"Do you know how hot I am?"

"You said we were taking a taxi and then you changed your mind. That's just so unfair!"

And so, sweat pooling in the folds of my neck, for 15 seconds or less, I had lost it.

Don't judge me for my one moment of weakness, my mind pled with the passerby with the shopping cart. If you saw me these last three days you'd get a totally different picture. Really! I was the picture of patience and serenity!

And right there, in the parking lot, a memory suddenly emerged in my mind.

It was two years ago and my husband and I were on our way back from a 48 hour trip to Haifa on our own. We waited at the bus stop, the breezy March air whispering hints of spring in my ear. The distant hills outlined the

blue sky like a golden magic marker. And then I saw her. That woman! Mrs. B! The one that had given that lecture I'd attended some years back. Oh how I'd admired her! She had a PhD in psychology as well as a vast storehouse of Torah literature at her fingertips. And now she was here! And she was sitting with her husband. What a great opportunity to approach such a busy woman as we both idled our time at the bus stop.

But something stopped me. A scratchiness in her voice. And then I noticed her husband, in a wheelchair, hands splayed awkwardly in his lap like pick-up sticks. Oh right. I had heard that she cared for her disabled husband. It had been that way for decades. What an incredible woman! But still, something held me back.

"You know what?" I heard her saying, her voice harsh. "Fine! You don't want to go, don't go. I don't know what to tell you. You want to ruin this trip for me? Is that what you want? I don't even care anymore."

Her poor husband stammered an excuse, but she did not appear to be listening. She turned her body away from him slightly, her posture exuding hostility.

I was aghast. This woman that passed herself off as someone people could venerate was really a witch in disguise! Was this how she cared so 'selflessly' for her disabled husband? In one instant, I lost all respect for her. I did not approach her. And for years afterwards, when her name appeared on the lecture circuit, I grimaced. What could anyone learn from someone like her?

And suddenly, now, here in this grimy old parking lot, I remembered Mrs. B. Mrs. B., who perhaps, like me, had reached the end of her rope. Mrs. B. who devotedly took care of her husband day in and out for so many years. Mrs. B. who may have shelved scores of personal dreams and aspirations in favor of caring for the man that she loved.

I conjured up her face now.

*Please don't judge me for my moment of weakness,* she pleaded with me.

On Rosh Hashanah, God judges each and every one of us. Do we want to be judged for our moments of weakness and despair? Or do we want to be looked at globally, with a focus on our strengths? And if we beseech God to bypass our moments of failure, then doesn't our fellow man deserve the same courtesy? Can we honestly ask God to extend a common decency to us that we can't muster up on our own?

I pictured Mrs. B's face in my mind, her words dangling in the oppressive air.

*I'm only human. Please don't judge me.*

"I wouldn't dream of it," I whispered softly. Then I smiled at my children and directed them towards the bus stop.



## Revolutionary Shofar

by Rabbi Tzvi Gluckin

**A Jew means being part of the counter-culture.**

"What's that?" I asked pointing at something very green and organic looking.

"Fried fenugreek."

"Interesting... and that?"

"Pomegranate."

"Uh huh... is that a fish head?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Leadership. Take initiative. Remember to be a head and not the tail. Some people use a goat's head."

"I think it's staring at me."

This was my first Rosh Hashanah with observant Jews. The smorgasbord from the unknown had thrown me for a loop.

My host was a young rabbi type in a black suit. He had a face full of beard.

"Rosh Hashanah is the day of radical Jewish consciousness," he said matter-of-factly.

"Judaism is radical?" I asked.

He grabbed his beard and glowered at me in mock rage. "Do I look like a conformist goon to you!?" he shouted. "Our people have been outside the mainstream since the beginning of time. Being a Jew means to be a part of the counter-culture. Didn't you eat your fenugreek?"

"I don't get it. What's this have to do with Rosh Hashanah?"

"On Rosh Hashanah the Jewish idealist declares his dream of global unity. He prays for the day when the whole world will work together under a unified banner. It's revolutionary."

"How? Every hippie wants global unity."

"The shofar, man, the shofar. Weren't you listening?"

I was very confused. I asked if I could leave the table.

"Sure," my host said. "We don't believe in religious coercion."

I was agitated. I walked around for a while thinking. "What is he talking about?" I thought to myself.

I went back to my room and looked through a copy of the Rosh Hashanah prayer book. I read some of the commentaries. My host had been right. The prayers did talk about global awareness. Unity was a big theme. I noticed that not only was the goal to unify humanity, but if everything worked according to plan, then on a spiritual level all of creation would be operating in unison, from rocks and plant life, all the way up to the highest metaphysical realms.

It was a beautiful image. But what was the point? How was this different from any other utopian vision?

I reluctantly wandered into synagogue the next morning. I sat in a corner reading about more themes of the day as the people around me prayed. It was hot in the room and there wasn't air conditioning.

A few hours into the service, everyone stood up in silence. The only audible sound was the hum of the fans. I felt guilty, so I stood up, too. A man in the center of the room took out a shofar. He blew a number of blasts on command.

I closed my eyes. I felt myself back in the desert. The hot sand kissed my bare feet. I saw camels and Bedouins. I began to appreciate what my host had been talking about. Judaism was earthy.

The jagged blast of the horn reverberated in my spine. I woke up. I hadn't been asleep, but I had been. I had been deaf to the real message of Rosh Hashanah. The shofar was a wake-up call. It wasn't about paying lip service to ideological platitudes about a better world. It was about waking up and doing something about it. The shofar was screaming, "Be real. If you want this world to be amazing then get off your butt and do something!"

I wanted to change the world but first I had to change myself. This is what the shofar had taught me. This was the message of Rosh Hashanah.

After services I ran over to my host.

"I understand you!" I yelled. "I want to put on a robe and wander off into the sunset. I want to dramatically affect humanity. I can make a difference. Where do we begin?"

"After lunch, brother. You can't conquer the world on an empty stomach. Tonight we're eating starfruit."

I was ready for anything.



## **It's A Wonderful Life**

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

It's a wonderful life.

At least that's what a movie by that title, considered a classic of American cinema, wants us to believe. George Bailey, the hero of the film powerfully acted by James Stewart, finally decides upon suicide as his only recourse

to solve his financial problems. Because he has a \$15,000 life insurance policy he feels he's worth more dead than alive. Acting on his desire to help his family he's ready to jump off a bridge when the angel Clarence intercedes not only to save his life but to make him realize that it is really worth living.

The way the angel accomplishes this incredible transformation from a man anxiously seeking his own annihilation to a person perceiving the true value of his existence and the ultimate meaning of his life contains a powerful Rosh Hashanah message.

How should we fulfill our obligation to better ourselves as we reach the 10 days of repentance on the Hebrew calendar? Many of us emphasize focusing on our sinfulness. It is a time to seek out our flaws, to seriously consider our failings. And of course that must be part of our personal stock taking.

But that cannot be the whole story. If we spend our time only in self-condemnation we stand in danger of losing sight of the ways in which we have been successful. If we stress only the ways we've gone wrong we won't ever be able to notice our accomplishments. We need to first become aware of the positives in our lives.

This point explains the sequence of the days book-ending our spiritual journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur we fast. We beat our breasts in confession of all of our sins. We cry out to God, "Who are we? What is our lives? We come from the dust of the earth and we return to the dust of the earth." It is a recognition of how much we have failed, how far we have come from reaching our fullest potential. Yom Kippur is a necessary restraint to our egos. Before we can feel fully reconciled with God it is essential for us to demonstrate our understanding of our imperfection.

But it is not Yom Kippur that begins the process of our purification. The 10 days of repentance start with Rosh Hashanah for good reason. Rosh Hashanah doesn't mark the first day of creation, but rather the last – the day on which the first human beings were created. Just as a host fully prepares for his guests before they enter his home, so too, the Midrash explains, God filled the earth on the first five days of creation with everything people might need before He brought them into being. Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day to endow them with a sense of their uniqueness and spiritual stature. It is we who were created in the image of God. Realizing this is a necessary prelude to leading a life worthy of our divine origin and our sacred nobility.

So on Rosh Hashanah we begin getting closer to God by reminding ourselves that we are Godly, that we have a pure soul. On Yom Kippur we conclude the journey by acknowledging that we have not yet achieved all that of which we are capable.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to remember how much we are worth to God, to our families, to our friends, and to the world. We feast as an expression of the joy we find in our life. And that understanding must precede the Yom Kippur emphasis on our failings that prompt us to fast and to cry over our imperfections.

To lead our lives only from a Yom Kippur perspective is to insure discontent and despondency. To be overwhelmed by a constant feeling that we are failures is to invite the pernicious desire to end it all. Why bother going on if we can never do anything right, why continue the struggle if we are doomed to always losing the battle? Suicide is the response chosen by those weighed down by a devastating sense that they accomplished nothing in their lives. It goes against God who as the ultimate giver of life decided that we still have a positive role to play here on earth.

In the film, after suffering a financial setback of \$8,000 that puts his small saving and loans bank at risk, George feels his life is worthless. Despite the serious consequences this entails, if George would have framed his life as a balance sheet of accumulated good versus the mistakes and bad things he has done, he would have been able to put events in a more balanced perspective and not judge himself so harshly.

In business, your losses can wipe out your balance sheet. But in the cosmic balance sheet of one's life, sin does not wipe out the positive gains. You are not your business or profession.

When George bitterly wept that he wished he would never have been born, Clarence, with his angelic power, showed him what the world would have been like if his wish really came true. He showed him his life's balance sheet. George never realized how many people he had affected during his lifetime. He had no idea how different his community, his family, his friends, his neighbors, and indeed the world would have looked had he never been on earth.

When George comes to realize how many lives he has touched and how much of an impact he has had on so many others, he can at last acknowledge the truth of his brother's toast that he is "the richest man in town."

There are countless "Georges" among us. There are all too many who deserve to be recognized as successes when we consider the ripple effects of their deeds translated into the achievements of others. And perhaps most relevant of all, in the time of our own introspection, as we feel ourselves burdened by the sins of our failures, we ought to make room for the contentment and peace of mind that comes from knowing that God also weighs the good we inspire in all those around us.

Perhaps the most powerful irony associated with "It's a Wonderful Life," is the message implicit in its reception

when it was released in 1946. The movie was a box office failure leading critics to say that Frank Capra, producer and director, was past his prime and no longer capable of producing a major motion picture. What an incredibly mistaken evaluation for a film that today is ranked by the American film industry as one of the top 10 classic movies in its genre ever made. What appeared at first glance to have been a failure is in retrospect one of the most outstanding successes. Isn't that the whole point of the film itself?

As we reflect upon the meaning of our earthly existence before the High Holy days, keep in mind that sometimes it takes years for the beauty of our own lives and its significance to be fully recognized.



## Climbing to the Top

by Emuna Braverman

### Did you do as much as you could with your gifts?

I can't imagine scaling Mount Everest under the most optimal of conditions. Could you imagine doing it blind?

Erik Weihenmayer was the first blind climber to do it. The feat seems beyond comprehension. While reading a recent Fast Company interview with him, it wasn't the climbing of this ultimate peak that moved me, as sensational as that surely was; it was his wise attitude towards life.

When asked if anything was possible, Weihenmayer answered, "No – there are limits. I mean, I can't drive a car. But there are good questions and bad questions in



life. The bad questions are what-if questions. What if I were smarter, or stronger? What if I could see? Those are dead-end questions. A good question is, How do I do as much as I can with what I have?"

That's the question we all need to answer. It's the primary question we will all need to respond to on the ultimate Day of Judgment. "Did you do as much as you could with the gifts I gave you?" And it's the question we need to respond to every year on Rosh Hashanah. "Did I do as much as I could with the gifts the Almighty gave me?"

Very few of us do. Luckily our Father in Heaven is a kind and generous one – and He gives us a chance to try again. Will I make a better effort in the future to achieve my true potential?

"Why do I have to learn math problems?" grumbled my young son. "What difference does it make?"

"The Almighty gave you a good head with an ability to think in many different ways and He wants you to develop all those ways so you can use your head in the best way possible."

I inferred from his responding grunt and return to the book he was reading that he found my explanation helpful!

But it's true. We've all seen the diagrams showing us what a small amount of our brain power we actually use. But it's not just our brain power that gets the short- shrift. Are we maximizing our capacity for kindness? Are we giving all that we could? Have we developed our patience to the max? Are we deepening our gratitude to those who have done well for us? Are we exercising the muscles of our positive character traits and marshalling our energies to appropriately channel our negative ones?

As Weihenmayer clearly stated, we all have limits. We may be too short for pro-basketball, not wealthy enough to fund cancer research, not creative enough to choreograph a ballet. It doesn't matter. We have each been given a unique set of talents with which to actualize our potential. That's our job description.

The Almighty's not going to compare my dancing abilities to Baryshnikov or my painting to Monet. But He will ask about some of that time I wasted lying around reading magazines when I could have been doing and growing. He will ask why I didn't do more with what I had.

You don't have to cook like Julia Child to feed your family and friends a delicious, healthy meal. You don't have to decorate your home like Martha Stewart to create an atmosphere of caring and comfort. You don't have to parent like Dr. Spock (in fact, it's better you don't!) in order for your children to feel loved and appreciated.

There's only one person you have to be like – you. There's only one person you have to make the most of – you. At Rosh Hashanah, we reaffirm that commitment to ourselves and the Almighty: I will strive to be the best that I can be. To make it more than just a slogan, the key is in the actualization. Our commitment must come with concurrent actions. What will I do today different than yesterday?

We have to make a plan and then check in with ourselves at the end of the day to ensure we've adhered to it. Our credibility – with the Almighty, and with ourselves – is on the line. Did I push myself just a little bit more today than I did yesterday? Did I venture just one step outside my comfort zone?

We don't understand the grand plan – why one person's challenge is wealth and another's poverty, hers illness and his health, hers a sharp business mind and his an artistic bent. But the Almighty has given us the ability to live up



to our challenges, to make the most of them and to flourish.

Think of the tremendous amount of willpower and determination it took Erik Weihenmayer to climb Mount Everest, the planning and the perseverance. To keep on pushing, step after step.

That's the job we all have – to keep on pushing. To believe in ourselves and in the Almighty's support. To be both realistic and hopeful.

One of Weihenmayer's strategies was to surround himself with "good people who make me stronger." That's an important tool of self-actualization. If your circle of friends discourages growth in favor of lying on the beach (I live in southern California and there are times when there's nothing like the ocean!), then it will be harder for you to accomplish serious goals. We want friends to push us (even if it sometimes makes us crazy!) rather than hold us back.

And we must have a positive attitude. Instead of bemoaning his fate, instead of railing against the unfairness of life, instead of succumbing to bitterness, Erik leads with a smile, with optimism and with faith.

"...when I'm climbing some hard rock 1,000 feet up, I'm not thinking, 'If I could see that hold up there, life would be so much easier.' I just think, Thank God I'm up here."

Erik Weihenmayer's life is a lesson in determination. Hour by hour, minute upon minute of single-minded focus and devotion. If he could harness all that power for climbing a mountain, how much more could we access to serve the Almighty?

Weihenmayer's secret is to believe in himself and his potential while recognizing appropriate limitations. If we believe in ourselves and our potential, the possibilities are

endless. And if we ask the Almighty to help us, we expand the boundaries exponentially.

The Jewish secret is that you don't have to do it alone. If you climb your personal Mount Everest and ask the Almighty to help you, He will carry you up that hill. The Almighty doesn't have to push Himself to give; He's just waiting for the opportunity. This year, ask for His help, ask Him to help you do as much as you can with what you have. Make that commitment to do all you can, and watch the doors open.



## ABCs of Rosh Hashanah

A handy checklist of everything you need to know.

### Pre-Rosh Hashanah

A key component of Rosh Hashanah preparation is to ask for forgiveness from anyone one may have wronged during the previous year. To whatever extent possible, we want to begin the year with a clean slate – and without anyone harboring a grudge against us. One should also be quick to forgive those who have wronged him.

Many people have the custom to go to the mikveh before Rosh Hashanah after midday. A mikveh, which has the power to purify from certain types of spiritual impurities, can be an important part of the teshuva process.

Some have the custom of visiting a cemetery the day before Rosh Hashanah and praying at the graves of the righteous. Of course, we do not pray "to" the righteous, but only to God who hears our prayers in the merit of the righteous.

The morning before Rosh Hashanah, we perform "*Hatarat Nedarim*" – annulling all vows. In Torah terms, saying something as simple as "I refuse to eat any more candy" can be considered a legal vow. Therefore, before Rosh Hashanah, we annul any vows, whether they were made intentionally or not. This is done by standing in front of three adult males and asking to be released from the vows that were made. The full text can be found in a Siddur or Rosh Hashanah Machzor.

## The Festive Meal

During the High Holidays, a round challah is used – symbolizing fullness and completion. After making the "Hamotzi" blessing, it is customary to dip the bread into honey – symbolizing our prayer for a sweet new year.

Then, after most of your slice of bread has been eaten, take an apple and dip it in honey. Make a blessing on the apple (since "Hamotzi" did not cover the apple) and eat a little bit of the apple. Then say, "May it be Your will, God, to renew us for a good and sweet new year." (OC 583)

Why do we ask for both a "good" AND "sweet" year? Doesn't the word "good" automatically include "sweet?"

Judaism teaches that everything happens for the good. It is all part of the divine will. Even things that may look "bad" in our eyes, are actually "good." So when we ask God that the year should be "sweet" (in addition to good), it is because we know that everything will be for the good. But we also ask that it be a "revealed" good – i.e. one that tastes "sweet" to us.

On Rosh Hashanah, we add the paragraph "Ya'aleh V'yavo" in Grace After Meals.

## Symbolic Foods

On Rosh Hashanah, we eat foods that symbolize good things we hope for in the coming year. We contemplate what these foods symbolize, and connect with the Source of all good things.

The symbolic foods are based on a word game which connects the name of a certain food, to a particular hope we have for the new year. Here is a list from the Talmud of symbolic foods customarily eaten on Rosh Hashanah. (The food and its related meaning are written in capital letters.)

- After eating LEEK or CABBAGE, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our enemies be CUT OFF."
- After eating BEETS, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our adversaries be REMOVED."
- After eating DATES, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our enemies be FINISHED."
- After eating GOURD, say: "May it be Your will, God, that the decree of our sentence should be TORN apart, and may our merits be PROCLAIMED before You."
- After eating POMEGRANATE, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our merits increase as the seeds of a POMEGRANATE."
- After eating the HEAD of a sheep or fish, say: "May it be Your will, God, that we be as the HEAD and not as the tail."

You can also use other foods and make up your own "May it be Your will..." For example, you could eat a raisin and celery, and ask God in the coming year for a "raise in salary" (raisin celery)!

## Rosh Hashanah Prayers

Since there are so many unique prayers on Rosh Hashanah, we use a special prayer book called a "Machzor."

In the "Amidah" and "Kiddush" for Rosh Hashanah, we say the phrase "Yom Teruah." However, if Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we say "Zichron Teruah" instead. (If one inadvertently said the wrong phrase, he needn't repeat the prayer.)

The supplication "Avinu Malkeinu" should be said on Rosh Hashanah, except when Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat coincide, since supplications are not said on Shabbat. If Rosh Hashanah falls on a Friday, "Avinu Malkeinu" is not said at Mincha.

During the High Holidays, the curtain on the ark is changed into a white one, to symbolize that our "mistakes will be whitened like snow."

The chazan (cantor) for the High Holidays should not be chosen for his vocal talents alone. Ideally, the chazan should be over 30 years old, God fearing, learned in Torah, humble, and married. A learned man under 30 with the other qualifications is acceptable. Though it is preferable to allow an unfit chazan to lead services, rather than cause strife over the issue in the community.

Since it is a question as to whether the "She'hechianu" blessing should be said on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we are accustomed to eat a new fruit or wear a new garment and say "She'hechianu" upon it.

## The Shofar

The essential mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is to hear the sounding of the shofar. The shofar blasts after the Torah Reading are called "Tekiot M'yushav."

The minimum Torah obligation is to hear nine blasts. However, there is a doubt whether the sound of the shofar should be a groaning type of cry (*Shevarim*), or a sobbing weep (*Teruah*), or a combination (*Shevarim-Teruah*). Therefore, we perform all three sounds, each

preceded and followed by an unbroken blast, *Tekiah*. Three of each set results in 30 blasts total, which are necessary to remove all doubt that the Torah precept has been fulfilled.

It is customary to blow shofar in the same place that the Torah is read, so that the merit of the Torah will support us. The shofar should be blown during the daytime. In ancient times, when the Romans persecuted the Jews, the rabbis instituted blowing the shofar before Musaf, since the Romans had guards in the synagogues during the early morning.

The person who blows the shofar must stand. He should be instructed immediately before blowing to have intention to fulfill the obligation for all those listening. Similarly, all those listening should be reminded to have intention that their obligation is being fulfilled.

Before blowing, two blessings are recited: "to hear the sound of the shofar," and "Shechianu." Once the blessings have been made, one may not speak until the end of the shofar blowing.

A woman may sound the shofar for herself and say the blessing. (Sefardi women do not say a blessing.) A child who is old enough to be educated regarding mitzvot is required to hear the Shofar.

The shofar is not blown when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.

The shofar used on Rosh Hashanah should be a curved ram's horn, and longer than four inches. It is permitted to use the shofar of an animal not ritually slaughtered. After the fact, any shofar is acceptable except the horn of a cow, ox or an unkosher species of animal.

In the "Amidah" prayer of Musaf, there are three special blessings: "*Malchiot*" (praises to God the King),

"*Zichronot*" (asking God to remember the merits of our Ancestors), and "*Shofrot*" (the significance of the shofar). During the chazan's repetition, we blow an additional 30 blasts in the various combinations.

It is the custom to blow 40 extra blasts at the end of services, bringing the total to 100. It is customary to prolong the final blast, which is called a "Tekiah Gedolah."

## Other Customs

It is customary to greet others as follows: "*L'shana Tova – Ketivah vi-chatima Tova.*" This means: "For a good year – You should be written and sealed in the good (Book of Life)."

One should try not to sleep or go for idle walks on the day of Rosh Hashanah. (The Arizal permits a nap in the afternoon.)

It is advisable to avoid marital relations, except if Rosh Hashanah falls on the night of the wife's immersion.

If a Bris Milah falls on Rosh Hashanah, it should be performed between the Torah reading and the shofar blowing.

## Tashlich

The "Tashlich" prayer is said on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah by a pool of water that preferably has fish in it. These prayers are symbolic of the casting away of our mistakes. Of course, it is foolish to think you can rid sins by shaking out your pockets. Rather, the Jewish approach is deep introspection and commitment to change. Indeed, the whole idea of "Tashlich" is partly to commemorate the Midrash that says when Abraham went to the Akeida (binding of Isaac), he had to cross through water up to his neck.

If Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbat, "Tashlich" is pushed off until the second day. If "Tashlich" was not said on Rosh Hashanah itself, it may be said anytime during the Ten Days of Teshuva.

Both the body of water and the fish are symbolic. In Talmudic literature Torah is represented as water. Just as fish can't live without water, so too a Jew can't live without Torah!

Also, the fact that fish's eyes never close serve to remind us that, so too, God's eyes (so to speak) never close; He knows of our every move.

This is the text of "Tashlich:"

*Who is like You, God, who removes iniquity and overlooks transgression of the remainder of His inheritance. He doesn't remain angry forever because He desires kindness. He will return and He will be merciful to us, and He will conquer our iniquities, and He will cast them into the depths of the seas.*

*Give truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham like that you swore to our ancestors from long ago.*

*From the straits I called upon God, God answered me with expansiveness. God is with me, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me? God is with me to help me, and I will see my foes (annihilated). It is better to take refuge in God than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in God, that to rely on nobles.*

Many people also read Psalms 33 and 130.