

Rosh Hashanah

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Meaningful Preparation



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Rosh Hashanah Dictionary

Common Rosh Hashanah words and phrases to help get you through the holiday.

by Dr. Yvette Alt Miller

Rosh Hashanah, the two-day Jewish holiday marking the New Year, is full of beautiful customs and traditions – and more than a few Hebrew terms and prayers. Here is a handy list of common Rosh Hashanah terms and names to help get you through the holiday.

Shana Tovah! (and its variations)

Shana means year in Hebrew, and *Tovah* means good – this is a standard Rosh Hashanah greeting.

Before Rosh Hashanah, it's customary to greet people with *Ketiva V'Chatima Tovah* – a Good Inscription and Seal. On Rosh Hashanah itself many people *L'Shana Tovah* (A Good Year) *Tikatev V'Tichatem* (May you be inscribed and sealed). This reflects the idea that on Rosh Hashanah our fates are inscribed for the coming year, and on Yom Kippur ten days later, our fate is sealed. For a woman, this greeting is conjugated differently: *L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevi V'Tichatemi*. After Rosh HaShana, people say *Gmar Chatima Tovah* – a good final seal (for a good year to come). Some people shorten this to the greeting *Gmar Tov*. *Gmar Tov* is used as a greeting all the way until Yom Kippur.

Another popular Rosh Hashanah greeting is *Shana Tovah U'Metukah* – may you have a good and sweet new year.

Yom HaDin - Day of Judgment

Rosh Hashanah is known as *Yom HaDin* – the [Day of Judgment](#). On this day, each person is evaluated and judged according to their past

deeds by God in His heavenly court. The Torah explains that “on Rosh Hashanah all creatures pass before Him” (Mishnah Rosh HaShana 16b).

The Talmud describes two heavenly ledgers open on this day: one to record our achievements and one in which our shortcomings will be noted, God forbid (Talmud Rosh HaShana 16b). Rosh Hashanah is a unique opportunity to contemplate our past actions, to resolve to make changes going forward, and to enter the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with an attitude of repentance and improvement.

Simanim

Siman means signs or omens – a signal indicating the way things will be. It's customary to eat foods that are [Simanim](#) for a good new year on the nights of Rosh Hashanah. The most famous *siman* is apples dipped in honey. This is eaten at the beginning of Rosh Hashanah dinner along with the blessing *May it be Your will, Adonai our God and the God of our forefathers, that You renew us for a good and a sweet new year.*

Other traditional *simanim* include pomegranates, fish and the head of a fish. (In some households, pastry or candy in the shape of a fish's head is used instead.)

Tashlich

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, there's a beautiful custom to walk to a body of water and recite *Tashlich*, a brief service reminding us of God's judgment and infinite mercy. Tashlich comes from the Hebrew word to send away; we symbolically cast our past sins into the sea, calling: "Cast into the depths of the sea all the Jews' sins."

Tashlich originated in Medieval times, though it harkens back to the time when the Jews returned to Israel to build the Second Temple in the 5th Century BCE. The prophet Nehemiah described a Rosh Hashanah when the Jews finally reestablished their nation in the Land of Israel: "Then all the people gathered together as one man at the plaza before the Gate of Water (in Jerusalem)" – there they listened to the Torah being read and were blessed as a nation on Rosh Hashanah (Nehemiah 8:1), near a flowing stream.

On Rosh Hashanah, we recognize God as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. In ancient times, the kings of Israel were crowned near the water – *Tashlich* gives us the opportunity to acknowledge God's kingship in our own lives today.

It's ideal to say *Tashlich* next to water containing fish: one reason is because fish procreate widely, and we too hope to build large families and communities. Fish also never close their eyes, reminding us that God's gaze never wavers.

If no body of water is available, it's possible to say *Tashlich* over a man-made container of water. It's also possible to delay *Tashlich* if necessary – if need be, it can be recited any time until the Hoshana Rabbah, the last day of Sukkot.

Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah

One of the most arresting aspects of Rosh Hashanah is the sound of the shofar blasts – each day of Rosh Hashanah (except when it falls out on Shabbat) we listen to a total of 100 blasts on a shofar, or ram's horn. The Talmud records that on Rosh Hashanah, our prayers and repentance rise up to the Heavens accompanied by the sound of the shofar's blasts (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

There are four types of *shofar sounds*: *Tekiah* is one blast on the horn; *Shevarim* is a succession of three short blasts; *Teruah* is nine shorter blasts; *Tekiah Gedolah* is one very long blast on the shofar that concludes the shofar portion of the Rosh Hashanah service.

Jewish sage Saadia Gaon (882–942) taught that just as it's customary to sound a trumpet at the coronation of an earthly king, the shofar is a fitting accompaniment to Rosh Hashanah when we commemorate God's creation of the entire universe and His sovereignty over it.

Teshuva

Teshuva – repentance in Hebrew – comes from the word *lishuv*: to come back. On Rosh Hashanah, we return to being the good people that we are at heart. Unlike some religions, Judaism doesn't view mankind as intrinsically sinful. We are each created *betzelem Elokim*, in the image of God. We each have the capacity to rise to great spiritual heights.

On Rosh Hashanah we dedicate ourselves anew to returning to God and to becoming the good people that we know we are capable of being.

Teshuva, Tzedakah, Tefillah

Our prayers on Rosh Hashanah remind us of the three-fold formula for changing our ways and ensuring that we reach our potential in the coming year: *Teshuva* (repentance), *Tzedakah* (charity), *Tefillah* (prayer), and is the Jewish formula for changing our ways for the better and for growing spiritually. As the [Rosh Hashanah service](#) says, we know that everything that happens is in God's hands – "But repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree."

Unesaneh Tokef

This beautiful prayer is one of the highlights of the Rosh Hashanah service, and is said during the *Musaf* service. Its stirring words are those of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, who lived in the German town of Mainz in the 15th Century.

It is said that he was friendly with the Bishop of Mainz. One day the Bishop ordered Rabbi Amnon to convert to Christianity. Rabbi Amnon was terrified of defying the Bishop, and as a delaying tactic he asked for three days to think about the offer. Once he was home, he bitterly regretted giving the impression that he'd even consider betraying his Jewish faith. When the Bishop's men came to fetch him, Rabbi Amnon told the Bishop he was so regretful for even saying he'd think about converting that he wished his tongue would be cut out of his mouth.

The Bishop replied that Rabbi Amnon's tongue would indeed be cut out, and that wasn't the only part of him that would be torn away. He had his men cut off Rabbi Amnon's feet joint by joint, then his hands. After each cut, they asked Rabbi Amnon if he would convert; each time Rabbi Amnon refused. Finally, they brought

Rabbi Amnon home, near death. A few days later was Rosh HaShana. Rabbi Amnon asked to be brought to the synagogue. There, he recited the hauntingly beautiful prayer beginning [Unesaneh Tokef](#) (also pronounced *Unetaneh Tokef*) – "Let us now relate the power of this day's holiness..." When he was finished reciting the prayer, Rabbi Amnon's soul left his body. His last prayer inspires us still.

Malchiyot – Zichronot – Shofrot

The Talmud explains that [Rosh Hashanah](#) wouldn't be complete without mention of three key concepts: *Malchiyot* ([accepting God's Kingship](#) and rule of the world), *Zichronot* (Divine Remembrance of all our deeds and actions); and *Shofrot* (the blasts of the shofar). Each of these has a dedicated section in the lengthy *Mussaf* Silent prayer.

The Talmud explains that these three concepts are mandated by God for us to recall on Rosh Hashanah: "And recite before Me on Rosh Hashanah verses that mention Kingship, Remembrances, and Shofarot: Kingship so that you will crown Me as King over you; Remembrances so that your remembrance will rise before Me for good; and with what will the remembrance rise? It will rise with the shofar" (Rosh Hashanah 16b).

Rosh Hashanah is a chance to take the time to think deeply about God and His relationship with us. The Talmud explains that everyone ought to think of themselves not as all good or all bad, but as something in between. We each have deeds that we are proud of, and also memories of times we fell short of our ideals. Rosh Hashanah is a time to ask ourselves what we can do to increase our merits, and ensure we grow and change for the good in the coming year.

How Rosh Hashanah Can Transform Our Lives

10 essential insights that go to the heart of Judaism.

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

An excerpt from Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The genius of Judaism was to take eternal truths and translate them into time, into lived experiences. Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of humanity, invites us to live and feel the human condition in graphic ways.

The first thing it tells us is that **life is short**. However much life expectancy has risen, we will not, in one lifetime, be able to achieve everything we might wish to achieve. *Untaneh Tokef* tells the poetry of mortality with haunting pathos:

Man is founded in dust and ends in dust. He lays down his soul to bring home bread. He is like a broken shard, like grass dried up, like a faded flower, like a fleeting shadow, like a passing cloud, like a breath of wind, like whirling dust, like a dream that slips away.

This life is all we have. How shall we use it well? We know that we will not finish the task, but neither are we free to stand aside from it. That is the first truth.

The second is that **life itself, each day, every breath we take, is the gift of God**:

Remember us for life, O King who delights in life, and write us in the book of life – for Your sake, O God of life. (*Zikhronot*)

Life is not something we may take for granted. If we do, we will fail to celebrate it. God gives us one gift above all others, said Maimonides: life itself, beside which everything else is secondary.

Other religions have sought God in heaven, or in the afterlife, the distant past or the distant future. Here there is suffering, there reward; here chaos, there order; here pain, there balm; here poverty, there plenty. Judaism has relentlessly sought God in the here-and-now of life on earth. Yes, we believe in life after death, but it is in life before death that we truly find human greatness.

Third, **we are free**. Judaism is the religion of the free human being freely responding to the God of freedom. We are not in the grip of sin. We are not determined by economic forces or psychological drives or genetically encoded impulses that we are powerless to resist. The very fact that we can do *teshuvah*, that we can act differently tomorrow than we did yesterday, tells us we are free. Philosophers have found this idea difficult. So have scientists. But Judaism insists on it, and our ancestors proved it by defying every law of history, surviving against the odds, refusing to accept defeat.

Fourth, **life is meaningful**. We are not mere accidents of matter, generated by a universe that came into being for no reason and will one day, for no reason, cease to be. We are here because a loving God brought the universe, and life, and us, into existence – a God who knows our fears, hears our prayers, believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, who forgives us when we fail, lifts us when we fall and gives us the strength to overcome despair.

The historian Paul Johnson once wrote: “No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny.” He concluded: “The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose” (Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, Prologue). That too is one of the truths of Rosh Hashanah.

Fifth, **life is not easy**. Judaism does not see the world through rose-tinted lenses. The sufferings of our ancestors haunt our prayers. The world we live in is not the world as it ought to be. That is why, despite every temptation, Judaism has never been able to say the Messianic Age has come, even though we await it daily. But we are not bereft of hope because we are not alone. When Jews went into exile, the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, went with them. God is always there, “close to all who call on Him in truth” (Ps. 145:18). He may hide His face, but He is there. He may be silent, but He is listening to us, hearing us and healing us in ways we may not understand at the time but which become clear in retrospect.

Sixth, **life may be hard, but it can still be sweet**, the way the challah and the apple are on Rosh Hashanah when we dip them in honey. Jews have never needed wealth to be rich, or power to be strong. To be a Jew is to live for simple things: the love between husband and wife, the sacred bond between parents and children, the gift of community where we help others and others help us and where we learn that joy is doubled and grief halved by being shared. To be a Jew is to give, whether in the form of *tzedaka* or *gemilut* *mesadim* (acts of loving-kindness). It is to learn and never stop seeking, to pray and never stop thanking, to do teshuva and never stop growing. In this lies the secret of joy.

Throughout history there have been hedonistic cultures that worship pleasure and ascetic

cultures that deny it, but Judaism has a different approach altogether: to sanctify pleasure by making it part of the worship of God. Life is sweet when touched by the divine.

Seventh, **our life is the single greatest work of art we will ever make**. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in one of his earliest works, spoke about *Ish HaHalakha*, the halakhic personality and its longing to create, to make something new, original. God too longs for us to create and thereby become His partner in the work of renewal. “The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself.” That is what *teshuva* is, an act of making ourselves anew. On Rosh Hashanah we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from his canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.

Eighth, **we are what we are because of those who came before us**. Our lives are not disconnected particles. We are each a letter in God’s book of life. But single letters, though they are the vehicles of meaning, have no meaning when they stand alone. To have meaning they must be joined to other letters to make words, sentences, paragraphs, a story, and to be a Jew is to be part of the strangest, oldest, most unexpected and counterintuitive story there has ever been: the story of a tiny people, never large and often homeless, who nonetheless outlived the greatest empires the world has ever known – the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, the Greeks and Romans, the medieval empires of Christianity and Islam, all the way to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Each in turn thought itself immortal. Each has gone. The Jewish people still lives.

So on Rosh Hashanah we remember and ask God to remember those who came before us: Abraham and Isaac, Sarah, Hannah and Rachel, the Israelites of Moses’ day, and the Jews of

every generation, each of whom left some living legacy in the prayers we say or the melodies in which we sing them.

And in one of the most moving verses of the middle section of Musaf we recall the great words said by God through the prophet Jeremiah: “I remember of you the kindness of your youth, your love when you were a bride; how you walked after Me in the desert, through a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). Our ancestors may have sinned, but they never stopped following God though the way was hard and the destination distant. We do not start with nothing. We have inherited wealth, not material but spiritual. We are heirs to our ancestors’ greatness.

Ninth, **we are heirs to another kind of greatness too**, that of the Torah itself and its high demands, its strenuous ideals, its panoply of mitzvot, its intellectual and existential challenges. Judaism asks great things of us and by doing so makes us great. We walk as tall as the ideals for which we live, and those of the Torah are very high indeed. We are, said Moses, God’s children (Deut. 14:1). We are called on, said Isaiah, to be His witnesses, His ambassadors on earth (Is. 43:10).

Time and again Jews did things thought impossible. They battled against might in the name of right. They fought against slavery. They showed that it was possible to be a nation without a land, to have influence without power, to be branded the world’s pariahs yet not lose self-respect. They believed with unshakable conviction that they would one day return to their land, and though the hope seemed absurd, it happened. Their kingdom may have been bounded by a nutshell, but Jews counted themselves kings of infinite space. Judaism sets the bar high, and though we may fall short time and again, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

allow us to begin anew, forgiven, cleansed, undaunted, ready for the next challenge, the next year.

And finally comes the sound of the shofar, piercing our defenses, a wordless cry in a religion of words, a sound produced by breath as if to tell us that that is all life is – a mere breath – yet breath is nothing less than the spirit of God within us: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). **We are dust of the earth but within us is the breath of God.** And whether the shofar is our cry to God or God’s cry to us, somehow in that *tekia*, *shevarim*, *terua* – the call, the sob, the wail – is all the pathos of the Divine-human encounter as God asks us to take His gift, life itself, and make of it something holy by so acting as to honor God and His image on earth, humankind.

For we defeat death, not by living forever but by living by values that live forever; by doing deeds and creating blessings that will live on after us; and by attaching ourselves in the midst of time to God who lives beyond time, “the King – the living, everlasting God.”

The Hebrew verb *lehitpalel*, “to pray,” more precisely means “to judge oneself.” On Rosh Hashanah we stand in judgment. We know what it is to be known. And though we know the worst about ourselves, God sees the best; and when we open ourselves to Him, He gives us the strength to become what we truly are. Those who fully enter the spirit of Rosh Hashanah emerge into the new year charged, energized, focused, renewed, knowing that to be a Jew is to live life in the presence of God, to sanctify life for the sake of God, and to enhance the lives of others – for where we bring blessings into other lives, there God lives.

The Most Important Letter You'll Write

A powerful exercise everyone should do to prepare for the High Holidays.

By Debbie Gutfreund

Dr. VJ Periyakoil has been a geriatrics and palliative care doctor for the last 15 years. She has had numerous conversations with her patients at the end of their lives, and the most common emotion that they express is regret. Regret that they never told the people that they loved how much they cared about them. Regret that they never fixed broken friendships. Regret that they didn't have the courage to forgive others or ask for forgiveness.

One of Dr. Periyakoil's patients was a Marine veteran who had lived a quiet, proud life mostly devoid of emotion. As he was dying, his wife would sit beside him for hours watching him watch television. She told the doctor that in their over-50 years of marriage, her husband had never been much of a talker. But as this Marine combat veteran began to face his own death, he started to speak to Dr. Periyakoil.

He talked about how much he regretted not spending more time with his wife whom he loved dearly. He spoke about how proud he was of his son who had followed in his father's footsteps. But when the doctor mentioned these sentiments to his wife and son, they looked at her with obvious disbelief. They thanked her for her kindness but they insisted that the patient would never say anything like that.

One day Dr. Periyakoil asked the veteran if she could record him when he spoke about his family and then play it back for his wife and son. He agreed and the doctor gave his wife and son

the taped letter, which brought tears to their eyes. This man had never been able to tell his wife directly how much he loved her, but he was able to record it.

This moving experience gave Dr. Periyakoil the idea to begin the Stanford Friends and Family Letter Project. It's a free template that is available in eight languages at med.stanford.edu/letter that allows writers to express forgiveness, regret and gratitude.

The letter helps writers complete seven life review tasks: acknowledging important people in our lives, remembering treasured moments, apologizing to those we have hurt, forgiving those who have hurt us and saying "thank you," "I love you" and "good-bye."

One letter-writer wrote to his wife: "Lily, I wish I had loved you more." Others wrote things to their children that they hadn't been able to express to them before. Some participants apologize, like one father who told his daughter, "I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you growing up." Others forgave people in their lives for both unpaid loans and past insults.

There is also a template for those who are healthy. The letter does not have to be shared, and some people use it as a living legacy document which they continue to update as time goes on. This letter reminds me of the work that we are supposed to be doing in this month of Elul:

Reviewing our lives and our relationships.

- Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness.
- Acknowledging important people in our lives and thanking them.
- Thinking about treasured moments that have brought us to where we are today.
- Having the courage to say “thank you.”
- Having the courage to say “I love you.”

And finally, coming to terms with something that many of us don’t want to think about: “goodbye.” Who wants to think about death while they are still healthy? Who wants to accept that our time is limited, and that none of us know how much longer we each have to live? Most of us don’t want to think about, much less write about, how we would say goodbye to those that we love.

In many ways it is too painful to think about how we would say goodbye to this life, to our chance to make a difference here, to the loved ones left behind. But perhaps this last part of

the letter is the most important life review task for any of us to complete. Because when we can express what we want to be remembered for, we remind ourselves what we are living for. When we accept that we too will one day have to give an accounting for our lives, we don’t take today’s opportunities for granted. We can take an honest look at ourselves, at what we did, who we became, and the connections we made or failed to make.

The words of one of the letter writers keep echoing in my mind: “I wish that I had loved you more.” I cannot imagine how painful that must have been to write in the days before he died. Because don’t we all wish that sometimes? That we had loved more and criticized less? That we had followed our dreams? That we had forgiven and been forgiven? That we had said thank you and learned how to say goodbye?

Writing a life review letter will probably be the most important letter that any of us will ever write. The hardest part is having the courage to begin.

Identifying Your Life’s Mission

This Rosh Hashanah, electrify your life with purpose.

By Sara Yoheved Rigler

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:

1. Ask yourself (and write down): What were the five or ten most pleasurable moments in my life?
2. 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:

1. When someone in my Johannesburg audience came up after I spoke and told my son, "Your mother's words changed my life."
2. When someone tells me, "Your book changed my life."
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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."

Facing the CEO

Renewing your contract for the upcoming year.

By Rabbi Yerachmiel Milstein

Why doesn't Rosh Hashana come *after* Yom Kippur? Wouldn't it make more sense to first have our sins forgiven on Yom Kippur, and then go and face the heavenly tribunal on the Day of Judgment all bright eyed and bushy tailed?

Let's get a handle on this by using the following business model.

The very day you receive your MBA degree you get a call from a prominent head hunter asking if you'd be interested in heading up the sales department of a brand new, start up company for a ridiculously fat salary. After deliberating for a full eight seconds you say, "Sure."

Six months later, you're busy as a bee overseeing a staff of 60 salespeople, and business is definitely booming. One day you get a call from one of the higher ups in the firm. It seems there'd been a small oversight when they opened the company – no one ever bothered to actually create an accounting department! No one knows whether the company is actually making or losing money. The call is meant to give you a heads up that after a detailed financial review of each department, there will probably be some downsizing of personnel.

A week later you get a call from "Bob from accounting" explaining that every department head is being asked to prepare for an audit which would determine whether the department was profitable or not. He asks that you gather all available records and present yourself to the pencil pushers in 30 days.

You really love your job and have every intention of staying with this firm, so you get real busy doing an internal audit to collect all the data that will show your department is in fact profitable. About two weeks into the process something starts gnawing at you. The numbers aren't really adding up. Seems you're costing the company more than you were bringing in. You're a liability.

So you remain awake night after night trying to figure out what you are doing wrong and how you are going to fix it. Maybe if you fess up to the problems and propose an impressive solution you just might be able to make the case to get another chance to make it right. Hey, unlike the new rookie replacement they'd be likely to hire in your place, at least you know where the hemorrhage is and how to stop it.

You start to tinker and make some changes here and there, examining every possible improvement with great interest, sensitivity and insight. And with each change you implement you can actually begin to feel things turning around for the better.

The day of the review finds you extremely nervous, but you think that you've created a small window of hope with all the improvements you've made. Bob politely shakes your hand and points to the far corner of the room, where the company CEO himself is seated, already deeply engrossed in poring over your documents; furrowing his brow here and widening his eyes there.

You wait just outside the office and finally, after many nail biting hours Bob emerges from the office and says, "I can see that you've been trying, but there is just not enough data to go by. Why don't we give you another ten days to continue to implement your changes and you'll take it up again then with the CEO himself."

The next ten days become a blur of motion and activity, with every possible nuance of change and improvement cautiously considered and carefully weighed. The big day arrives and you're feeling exhausted, anxious, but just the smallest bit hopeful as you walk into the meeting with the CEO weighed down with armloads of new spreadsheets and sheaves of documents.

You immediately launch into your presentation, defending your accomplishments, acknowledging your mistakes and laying out the perfect strategy to prevent a relapse of unprofitability.

The CEO meticulously examines all your paperwork and after what seems like an eternity he looks up at you and says, "I'm sorry. It's just not enough."

You've exhausted every avenue of hope and are about to throw the towel in, when it suddenly dawns on you that the CEO just happens to be your father!

You look directly in his eyes and, sobbing uncontrollably, you call out, "I know I didn't really measure up. But, hey Dad, it's me! Could you cut me some slack and gimme a break just this one time?"

Holiday Season

The universe is God's global enterprise and its main product line is good deeds.

God created an amazingly beautiful, brilliantly engineered world which is perfect in so many ways but is purposefully left lacking in others. Perfection reigns in the coral reef, at Yosemite and in the ingenious design of DNA. Yet pockets of imperfection exist where children go hungry and illness causes much misery. Like any prosperous, good father, God takes His children into the business to complete His work and gives them the extra money they need to feed the starving, the wherewithal to cure the ill and strength to uplift the infirm.

In fact, the Hebrew word for charity is *tzedaka*, which comes from the word "justice." Charity is all about rectifying the pockets of injustice where the wealth seems to be spread unevenly. This one hasn't enough money and his brother has got a little extra. The charitable deed rights the wrong and justice prevails.

We of the human race are God's employees. Our job description is clear. Contribute to the enterprise's bottom line to the point of profitability: the spiritual assets must exceed the debits. To ensure the firm's ongoing success an accounting system is put into place which examines each employee's performance vis-a-vis the company's bottom line.

Rosh Hashana is the day of accounting where each Jew is called before the heavenly accountants who weigh every spiritual transaction, as well as every infraction, to determine whether the employee's contract will be renewed for the coming year. It is for this reason that Jews traditionally spend Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashana, carefully examining their every action to see how it impacted the overall spiritual profitability of the enterprise, God's universe.

In performing *teshuva*, repentance, we

figure out where we went wrong and just as importantly how we're going to fix it. And on the Day of Judgment we arrive at the synagogue somewhat frightened, subdued and introspective, but ready to plead for the renewal of the contract – another year of life – because at least we have identified the problem and have taken measures to make sure it doesn't happen again.

But who can truly say that they've done all they can do as God's employees and are therefore assured of a positive outcome on Rosh Hashana? Therefore we are asked to consider our fates as hanging in the balance and we are given until Yom Kippur to more fully examine our moral issues and better implement our fixes and resolutions. On Yom Kippur, we are so consumed by the uncertainty of our fate that we can't even think about eating or drinking. Over and over we try to account for our sins and resolve for them never to recur as we stand before the CEO, God Almighty Himself. Late in the day, we must conclude that for all our *teshuvah* we still might find ourselves a tad less than fully qualified for a renewal of our life contracts.

Just when it seems that all is lost, we look up and notice that God is our own Father in heaven. So in the final prayer service of the High Holy Days, we beseech Him, "*Avinu Malkeinu* – our Father, our King!" *Hey Dad, it's me. I'm your son. I know I messed up but please, this one time, give me a break.* What father can resist that kind of sincerity on the part of his beloved child.

So He forgives us but asks us to undergo one more challenge. "Now that we've made up, you and I, why don't you come on over to My house and see if you can get along with your siblings as well."

The holiday of Sukkot is all about leaving our permanent abodes and moving into a house with walls as sturdy as you want to make them, but one where the roof – the separation and barrier between us and God – is intentionally only loosely covered. This makes it God's house. We are further commanded on Sukkot to take the four species, each symbolic of a different type of Jew, and hold them together every day of the holiday. After restoring our relationship with the Almighty, He invites us into His home where we are asked to unify with all the Jewish People and live harmoniously as one big family for a full week.

Now that we've reunified as a family, God is loath to have us leave after seven days and longingly asks us to hang around for another day which we call *Shmini Atzeret*, "the eighth, extended day" of the holiday.

And, the next final day of this holiday is called *Simchat Torah*, "the happiness of Torah." We dance ecstatically holding the sacred Torah scrolls close to our bodies while we circle the *bimah*.

According to the Jewish mystics, *Simchat Torah* is not so much that we happily celebrate the beauty of our Jewish Torah, but that once we have restored our relationships with our Father and our brothers and sisters, it is the Torah and by extension God Himself, Who joyously celebrates us, His beloved children.

What a month! What a way to start the year!

Rosh Hashanah & the Art of Wanting

Deep down, what do you truly desire?

By Yaakov Astor

Three years ago a new self-help fad swept the world. Offering nothing less than everything from unimaginable wealth to happiness and finding one's soul mate, the people behind the fad claimed they had discovered a very old "secret" that had been carefully guarded and handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years, across many cultures. Presenting this secret to the masses for the first time, they called their film documentary and accompanying book, "The Secret."

And they made a mint.

After one gets past the glitter, the underlying core of the "secret" is a powerful idea expressed in the Talmud that has special relevance to Rosh Hashana.

The operative dynamic behind "the secret" is a concept called the "Law of Attraction":

Everything that's coming into your life you are attracting into your life. And it's attracted to you by virtue of the images you're holding in your mind. It's what you're thinking.

You become what you think about most, but you also attract what you think about most....

Long ago, the rabbis of the Talmud said: "The way a person wishes to go is the way he will be led" (*Makkos* 10b). If a person really wants to do something – for good or bad – all the elements of the world surrounding him will help him go in that direction. The universe will conspire to help him achieve his burning desire.

What we want – really want – is where we are going to be led.

The Wise of Heart

A verse in the Bible reads, "To those who are wise of heart I have given wisdom" (*Exodus* 31:6). If you are only given wisdom after you have a wise heart, how do you get a wise heart in the first place? It's a catch-22.

The answer is that the hallmark of a person who is "wise of heart" is that they have a burning *desire* for wisdom. If they have the desire, then the wisdom will come.

The emphasis in the verse is the word *heart*: If the heart desires it then the wisdom will come. What you want has to be not just an intellectual understanding, but something that is pounding inside of your *heart*. If your heart is numb, you do not act. You only act when you truly desire it.

First Thing in the Morning

The great 18th century sage the Vilna Gaon suggested using this technique first thing in the morning. There is a special intensity about early morning thoughts – those moments of reverie while in our beds even before fully awakening.

If your first thought in the morning is connecting to what you want – what you *really* want – you will get up with energy. You'll be focused and won't get sidetracked by distractions. And things will happen. A practical solution will come to mind. People will call and say yes. Doors will open.

So what's important to you? Which way is your

arrow pointed? What did you get up this morning thinking? What was your first desire in the day?

Whatever is truly in your heart, the day will conspire to help you achieve it.

Sometimes life sends you a situation to test the strength of your resolve. For example, if you have decided that you are not going to get angry today you may nevertheless find yourself in a clear anger-producing situation. If you pass the test you will be much stronger for it and much better equipped to handle situations like it in the future. It is like a rocket leaving the atmosphere: it struggles mightily against gravity, but then reaches the point where it finally breaks into space and the resistance is over.

The beginning of anything is the burning desire to do it.

You are what you want

The yardstick of who we are is what we want. What do you want? Do you become excited when it comes to doing something unhealthy and unholy? Are you eager and anxious to do something healthy and good? What you want is a measuring rod of who you are.

You have a golden opportunity right now, and every morning, every day, to rethink what you want. If you take time, even a few minutes, to think about what you want, it can help you dig down to the root of what you *really* want. And from there everything can begin to flow.

Although this opportunity exists every day, on Rosh Hashana this question is the focal point. Rosh Hashana is the day to infuse the whole year with what we want. If we've been wanting the wrong things, we can affect global change in our beings on Rosh Hashana by truly yearning for the right things.

On Rosh Hashana you are setting the direction of

the upcoming year. Following through on what we want is what the rest of the year is about. Rosh Hashana is about wanting the right things, because what we want – *really* want – is where we will be led.

The Conflicted Heart

But there are many times when we don't seem to have the things we want. Since where I am is clearly not where I want to be, how can it be that we are led to where we want to be?

First, an inventory check is required. Perhaps they have more than they think, including the very thing they want, but just do not realize it.

At other times, the desire does not come to fruition because God does not want it to come about for whatever reason. There are circumstances beyond our control, for our own good.

Yet, at other times, there is a middle situation – where the person has been given the power in his hands to change his situation. That is the person who harbors conflicting desires. He truly wants one thing, but at the same time has a desire that conflicts with it. The second desire may be unconscious, but it creates an ambivalence that reduces his focus, energy and ability to follow through.

For instance, a person may say he has a desire to make money but at the same time he has a little voice telling him that "money is the root of all evil." A battle takes place in his heart every time he goes out to conquer the world financially. He starts out with tremendous energy, and then obstacles get in the way. Suddenly "money is the root of all evil" echoes in his head, whether he consciously hears it or not. "Why I am wasting my time?" he tells himself. So he gives up.

The same conflict may exist in spiritual matters: he wants to do good but he thinks that do-

gooders are naïve, foolish or not “cool.” Or at the same time he wants to be good he has a lust for doing something not good. And even if he wins the battle, the cost can zap him of energy needed to make a real breakthrough.

A verse in Psalms says: “A pure heart – create within me, God” (51:12). The heart is equivalent to what you want. We were born to want what is good. However, as we go on in life we can lose touch with this natural instinct. When we pray to God to “purify our hearts” we are asking Him to “purify our desires.”

The purer the desire of the heart, the more likely the person will succeed. The more intense the yearning is, the greater the chance for achievement.

If your heart isn't really in it, chances are it will not last. A person is led in the direction of his desire – only when he deep down truly wants it. If a person has things that are holding him back it could be a sign that, to some degree, he does not want it badly enough.

What can such a person do?

First Steps

There are no simple answers, but the starting point is the belief in the power of small steps. One success leads to another success. And that success leads to another success. Eventually, a critical mass of successes is created and out of nowhere a breakthrough happens.

A slight improvement in direction means that you are not static. The worst thing is to stay in one place. The definition of being alive is to change, to move. Even slight changes should not be dismissed. To the contrary, focus on slight changes. Those are the ones that will create momentum in the right direction.

Even a lifetime of desire for the wrong things

can be reversed with that one small first step.

The Art of Wanting

The more a person has a unity of purpose, the more he summons up powers he did not even know he had. It starts once you determine that you are going to make it happen, when there is a *total* agreement in the human being that this is where I have to be pointed.

The key is the intensity of the wanting. Like any art you have to work at it. This is what it takes to transform your true want – your initial will – into tangible manifestations in the world.

The Hebrew word for “will” is ‘*ratzon*,’ from the root ‘*ratz*,’ to “run.” Just as physical strength and stamina are dependent upon the intensity of one’s workout regime, the strength of the *ratzon* is dependent upon its intensity.

A laser beam is light that is concentrated. Imagine a very sunny day. Now imagine you have a magnifying glass on that very sunny day and focus the light on a single spot. You can make a fire. It is the same light that is shining all around, however now the magnifying glass is focusing it.

The difference between success and failure is often the ability to concentrate, to focus all of one’s attention on a single goal. Focus is more important than raw intelligence. Single-mindedness can propel a person with a lesser mind to greater achievements than a person with a greater mind who is not as focused. A fast-working mind is not necessarily a focused mind.

Wanting is the basis of who we are and what we are most responsible for. It all starts there. And Rosh Hashana is the day, more than any other day, to hone your craft, to work on the art of wanting.

Many of the ideas in this article are based on a series of lectures by Rabbi Noach Orlowek.

8 Things I'm Letting Go before Rosh Hashanah

Because we can't start anew until we stop what we're doing.

By Debbie Gutfreund

The most important part of beginning anew is letting go; we need to stop what we are currently doing in order to do something else.

William Bridges writes in *Transitions*: "To become something else, you have to stop being what you are now; to start doing things in a new way, you have to end the way you are doing them now; and to develop a new attitude or outlook, you have to let go of the old one you have now... Endings always come first. The first task is to let go."

It's helpful advice for preparing for Rosh Hashanah. We should ask ourselves: What do I need to let go of in my life right now in order to become who I want to be?

Here are eight things that I am trying to let go of before Rosh Hashanah.

- 1. Needing to be right.** Most arguments are not worth the price that we pay afterwards. I would rather be connected than right. I would rather give in than give up the chance to be close to someone I care about.
- 2. Treating life like it's a race.** I'm letting go of rushing from one thing to the next like life is an endless race to complete my to-do list. I am accepting that my list will never be complete and that itself is a blessing. I'm

going to recognize the beauty and the gift of each moment instead of running past them.

- 3. Worrying about things that don't matter.** It doesn't really matter if the dinner I'm preparing is fancy enough or if the house is spotless. Instead I am going to focus on the parts that really do matter like the blessing of being together as a family or the joy of sharing a meal with friends.
- 4. Interrupting other people with my own agenda.** And not just when they're speaking, but I'm also letting go of preparing my questions and answers in my mind while they're talking. I'm going to try to really listen to what the person is saying instead of imposing my own agenda onto the conversation.
- 5. My desire for certainty.** I don't know what will happen tomorrow or even today, so I'm going to stop making decisions based on my desire for certainty. Instead I'm going to try to base my decisions on my values and my goals, even when they risk upsetting the status quo.
- 6. Taking things personally.** The unanswered text. The frown in reaction to my smile. The guy who just cut me off on the highway. The moody teenager. The overtired toddler. The friend who isn't listening because she is too caught up in her own issues. Most of the time

people are not out to insult us. They're usually tired, hungry, overworked, in a bad mood or a combination of all of the above. Instead of being insulted when someone rejects me, I am going to try to judge them favorably and assume that they are doing the best that they can under the circumstances that they have.

7. Avoiding pain and suffering. What we gain from pushing through our comfort zones is far greater than what we lose. Instead I'm going to reframe the suffering in my life as not only redemptive but as a gift given to me to help me grow.

8. Thinking that I am in control. There is very little that any of us actually control in our lives except for who we choose to become with the circumstances that we are given. Instead I am going to acknowledge God as both my Father and my King who creates and controls every breath that I take. And I am going to thank Him for bringing me and my family to this moment in this time. For creating us. For sustaining us. For bringing us into the New Year and for giving us all the strength to let go of what we need to in order to begin anew.

