

**Rosh Hashannah**  
5774

This morning we enter a time separate from any other. On Rosh Hashannah we begin a journey. We are present at the creation of the world. The awesome power that can order chaos and manifest substance from void is all around us. The essence of creation is accessible to us. We do not have the power to create the entire world anew, but enough power touches us to recreate ourselves.

We cannot speak a renewed self into being. It is through reflection, re-consideration, re-evaluation, re-alization and repentance; by re-gretting, re-liniquishing, re-capturing, re-claiming and re-pairing, that we are re-deemed; freed from that which holds us back, weighs us down, blinds our eyes, hardens our hearts. We are not expected to create a new being of ourselves, but to *re-turn* ourselves to the essence of our being.

From this moment to the end of the Neilah service on Yom Kippur we will live a lifetime. We will contemplate both life and death and while the idea of our death may frighten us, many of us will find confronting our lives equally as daunting. We hear that one of the most difficult requirements of *teshuvah*, is to own our own misdeeds, to apologize, to ask for forgiveness. Yet, I believe the most difficult step is the first one. How often do we even honestly own our actions? What a

terrifying vulnerability to turn off the justifications for our actions, to strip ourselves of explanations, to lay bare our intentional cruelties, our chosen indifferences, the ease with which we judge and condemn others while leaving the worst aspects of ourselves safely boxed up and hidden from our own view.

Yet all of these are part of the design of *Yamim Noraim*, The Days of Awe. The wisdom of our tradition does not ask us to take part in acts of creation, to confront our vulnerabilities, explore our inner depths without a source and force of support. From the sounding of the shofar to the closing of the gates, we are bolstered, lifted, enlightened by awe.

How many of us allow space in our lives, in our souls, in our being for an experience of awe? While awe can be inspiring, it is more than inspiration. While awe is meaningful, it is more than an intense emotion. Awe is the culmination of everything, a place where past meets future, love meets fear, endings meet beginnings, time and space combine, the entirety of creation is *echad*, everything is one thing. As Moses in the tent of meeting, we stand *panim el panim*, face to face, with *HaMakom*, a name for God translated as “The Place.”

Awe hits us like a tsunami, it takes our breath away, overwhelms us, moves us *and* anchors us in place. It drops

our jaw, tightens our chest, brings tears to our eyes and totally captures our attention. It cannot be expressed with words, explained by science or understood by logic. Awe so fills us with both bliss and despair that we can hardly distinguish one from the other.

Making room for an experience of awe can be intimidating. We spend much of our time protecting ourselves from such an experience. Our culture discourages intense emotional responses. We appreciate and approve small amounts of tears captured in a tissue before they can escape onto a cheek. We are uncomfortable with wailing and crying, streaming tears and snotty noses. We admire those who can control their response to emotional or physical pain. We disdain writhing and screaming. Allowing awe in is to give up emotional control. We cannot predict how awe will affect us. A choke of pain or a guffaw of laughter may escape our lips, it may cover our face with tears or make our shoulders role. To make space for awe is to allow for intense emotions and their expression.

But even in our stoic culture, awe is a natural response to new life. Almost anyone present to the birth of a child or even at the birth of an animal has experienced awe. The first breath of a new being carries every hope from our past and all our dreams for generations yet to come. During the next ten days we have the opportunity to experience the awe of a new life,

our own. We can be very old and still have a new life. Each breath we take is as new as the last. Each breath holds the same potential and the same promise as our first - yet any breath could be our last. None of us is owed another day. None of us earned this one.

The High Holy Days are a microcosm of life. In only 10 days we are born and die. Yet, like in our day-to-day lives, it is the in between that matters. The intermediate days are to be filled with action. We are to heal wounds we have caused, repair ties we have cut, comfort those we have distressed. In between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we do not exchange gifts we give and receive apologies. We clear the air and make more space for our next breath. We are ready to breathe in more of life.

I have had friends and family members who survived cancer or a heart attack and came out in awe of life itself. Small things no longer frustrate them; new adventures no longer scare them. There is nothing they are too old to try. People matter more, fun matters a lot and time is important. Breathing is a blessing. The threat of death actually changed their life. The High Holy Days are designed to shock us into this kind of change. It is the transformative power of awe. For while awe can be the result of a beautiful experience that same power may be found in frightening and awful ones.

One of the most memorable symbols of the High Holy Days is the “Book of Life.” We do not have a book of death. Which suggests that death is the result of omission. We are more likely to be diminished by what we don’t do than by what we are willing to try or to risk. For many people the idea of being inscribed in the Book of Life is uncomfortable. It suggests a Santa Claus in the sky, deciding who is naughty and nice. Yet, if one can get past the liturgical language and our own literalness, there is a beauty in the symbolism. Being inscribed in the Book of Life suggests that being alive means being present, being of substance, being accounted for. The opposite of life is to be omitted, unseen, and unaccountable.

Let the sound of the shofar blast blow like the winds in the desert, disturbing the surface of our souls and revealing what is hidden. May each of us discover something wonderful we hope to shine to brilliance and keep as well as those secrets we can cast away. As we recite the *al cheit*, may we feel freed rather than shamed; committed to make these mistakes no more. May each of us be inscribed in the Book of Life and be thankful for our continued presence. May each of us welcome the closing of the Neilah gates, renewed not just for this year but every year. And may these Days of Awe bring more awe to your experience of life.

L’shanah tova