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This past year I got my first gray hair. It happened last April. I was looking in the mirror and I saw a hair that did not belong. It was coarse and unruly, and shimmered in the light. Without giving it much thought, I did what any of you might have done. I twirled my finger around it and yanked it from my scalp. Thankfully, it was gone. But wouldn't you know it, a few days later another one appeared, also coarse and unruly, also shimmering in the light.

A bit dismayed by my discovery, I began to wonder how typical it was for a woman of my age to get gray hair, so I started looking around at other women's hair – was it gray, and if so, how gray? This proved to be a difficult task, however, because as we know, many women dye their hair. A significant stumbling block in my research. I then began to wonder when we started hiding our grey hair, hiding the evidence of our aging. What caused us to make it impossible for women to find camaraderie among our graying sisters? It all began with the wife of an Orthodox rabbi and her daughter-in-law. In his *New Yorker* article, "True Colors." Malcolm Gladwell tells the following story:

During the Depression - long before she became one of the most famous copywriters of her day - Shirley Polykoff met a man named George Halperin. He was the son of an Orthodox rabbi from Reading, Pennsylvania, and soon after they began courting he took her home for Passover to meet his family. They ate roast chicken, tzimmes, and sponge cake, and Polykoff hit it off with Rabbi Halperin, who was warm and funny. George's mother was another story. She was Old World Orthodox, with severe, tightly pulled back hair; no one was good enough for her son.

"How'd I do, George?" Shirley asked as soon as they got in the car for the drive home.
"Did your mother like me?"

He was evasive. "My sister Mildred thought you were great."

"That's nice, George," she said. "But what did your mother say?"

There was a pause. "She says you paint your hair." Another pause. "Well, do you?"

Shirley Polykoff was humiliated. In her mind she could hear her future mother-in-law: Fahrbt zi der huer? Oder fahrbt zi nisht? Does she color her hair? Or doesn't she?

The answer, of course, was that she did. ("True Colors," March 22, 1999, the *New Yorker*)

Polykoff went on to create the famous Clairol campaign which debuted in 1956. Translating from George's mother's Yiddish, the campaign's slogan was one simple line: "Does she or doesn't she?" Thanks to Polykoff, over the next decade the number of women who dyed their hair rose from 7 percent to 40 percent.

Gladwell writes that for Shirley Polykoff, "the color of her hair was a kind of useful fiction, a way of bridging the contradiction between the kind of woman she was and the kind of woman she felt she ought to be."

Regardless of whether we dye our hair, each of us has ways of bridging the contradiction between the kind of people we are and the kind of people we feel we ought to be. We join together during this Holiday season to take time to examine these contradictions.

Much of our energy throughout the year is focused outward – how do we look to others? Do we measure up? Are we good enough? Are our neighbors, colleagues, or friends more successful than we are? Do they earn more money than we do? Look younger than we do? Have happier family lives than we do?

All year long we may turn to someone and ask, in Polykoff's words, "Does she or doesn't she?" Does she dye her hair? Does he dye his hair? Does she spank her kids? Did you see how drunk he was at that party? Why doesn't she volunteer when she has so much time? Is he having an affair? Why did she get a raise when no one else did? How can he afford that new car?

But on these holy days we cease from asking "does she or doesn't she?" and shift our focus inward. Instead of focusing on what others think or concerning ourselves with what others are or are not doing, we focus on our own inner moral lives. How have I acted towards others? Have I been as generous or as compassionate as I could have been? Did I speak up when I should have? In what ways have I changed in the past year? Who have I become? Where am I headed?

We care about our community and our world, and what others do does matter. Their actions affect us personally, communally, and as a society. In Jewish tradition, there is a very real place for *tochechah*, for offering direct critique of our neighbor. It is important to hold others accountable for their actions. But all too often we critique others instead of shining a light on our own selves, on our own actions.

Jewish tradition provides us with a tool, called *cheshbon hanefesh*, to do this difficult work during these Yamim Noraim, during these Days of Awe. *Cheshbon hanefesh* literally means an accounting of the soul. Louis Newman, author of *Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah*, translates it as "soul reckoning." *Cheshbon hanefesh* entails that we look at ourselves honestly and come to terms not only with what we have done but with who we have become. At best, this is a personally rewarding endeavor. At worst, it an unpleasant, or even impossible, one.

It is impossible for some of us because we are masters at deceiving ourselves, and at seeing ourselves as blameless. We have many precious excuses for the way things are, and if we spin stories long enough we start to actually believe them.

And for others of us who recognize that we are flawed and imperfect, *cheshbon hanefesh* is a daunting task because addressing our shortcomings is too painful. We become mired in overwhelm and proceed down the path of self-rejection. We tell ourselves that we are too old to change. That we don't deserve better. That there is no way out.

Cheshbon hanefesh is a tremendously difficult task. Newman writes,

At stake is nothing less than our sense of self. If we look at ourselves honestly, the picture is likely to be less flattering than we would like. After all, this is exactly why we have avoided such moral self-assessment in the first place. But once we overcome that innate inner resistance, we face the challenge of what to do with our newfound awareness of our own moral failings. How shall we live with ourselves, if this is who we really are?

How shall we live with ourselves if this is who we really are? The task is to not let ourselves get stuck but instead to draw on our inner resources and strength and to use *cheshbon hanefesh* as a means for learning who we are and where we have gone wrong, so that next time we can act differently. We want to skirt around the process of looking closely at ourselves because it is so hard, but if we care about ourselves, others, and the world around us, then we have to examine how our actions affect others, because what we do matters. We are woven in an intricate web of relationships, and if we don't treat others with care and sensitivity, if we don't consider their feelings and their needs, then we have the potential to cause them tremendous pain.

Only by seeing ourselves as we really are can we embark on a different path, a path that can lead us to behave differently and become more whole through a combination of acceptance and change. Through *cheshbon hanefesh* we come to terms with and accept those parts of ourselves that we cannot change, and we commit ourselves to working on those parts of ourselves that we indeed can change. *Cheshbon hanefesh* is the key for reconciling the kind of people we are with the kind of people we feel we ought to be or wish so desperately to be.

At this time of year we should turn away from Clairol's "does she or doesn't she?" slogan, and instead turn to the words of their competitor, L'Oreal: "Because I'm worth it."

Vanity and brazenness aside, we would do well to keep these four words in mind – "Because I'm worth it" – when confronting all the places where we have fallen short and not lived up to our best moral selves. Indeed, this is why we should care – about ourselves, about others, about our communities, about our world: we are all worth it. Without doing this difficult work of examining who we are, we will not treat ourselves and others as well as we should. We are

much too likely to behave thoughtlessly, function on autopilot, put our own needs first, and perpetuate bad habits. If we really believe that we are worth it, and if we really believe that others are worth it, then we might consider reckoning with our souls.

As Newman writes,

...[B]y examining our lives, especially our flaws...we can set ourselves on the path of moral improvement...Soul reckoning is a toll for moral regeneration. The transgressions of the past need to be scrutinized so that they can be overcome, set aside, and ultimately redeemed.

If there is anything that I have learned from my graying hair – still, really only a few strands here and there – is that another year has passed. I may continue to yank my gray hairs or dye them or leave them alone, but whatever I do, it will not slow the passage of time. We are all getting older. There are plenty of challenges that come with getting older. Our bodies may not work the way they used to. We may suffer from the loss of loved ones. We may feel less important. We may feel that life is passing us by.

But aging can also be a wonderful thing. We possess one more year of experience. We possess one more year of learning. And if we really examine our inner moral lives, we can make each passing year a year of greater self-knowledge, growth, and wisdom.

Let us use these High Holy Days to engage in the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*. Not to beat ourselves up, but to become more compassionate, generous, thoughtful, courageous, and honest.

Because I – and you – are worth it.

L'shanah tovah umetukah – May this be a sweet new year.