

**Rosh HaShana 5782**  
**1 Tishrei 5782/7 September 2021**  
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Shana Tova!

Rosh HaShana is not just the beginning of a new year, but a sacred remembrance of the Creation of the World. And so, let me turn to the description of the Garden of Eden.

“Adam and Eve heard the sound of God moving about in the garden and they hid from God among the trees of the garden [because they were afraid]. And God called out to them: *Ayekah?* Where are you?”

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There are many ways to approach this question. I propose that asking this question is a way of setting our spiritual and moral agenda for the year.

*Ayekah?*

Where are you, God asks us.

*Ayekah?*

We are here and we hear the question. What do you expect from us?

*Ayekah?*

Where are we, in our relationship with You and in our relationship to those who are in need?

Answering these questions is not just an exercise in reflecting on God's presence, but also an opportunity to ask questions of ourselves.

*Ayekah?*

Where am I on life's journey?

How am I doing, in navigating the extraordinary challenges that face us?

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I know that, too often, the answers to these questions will reveal difficult truths.

God may seem distant.

We may be feeling the effects of stress, insecurity, and anxiety...and a pervasive sense of isolation.

How do we cope?

One possibility is found in a famous teaching of the hasidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunem.

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into one or the other, depending on the need.

When feeling high and mighty, one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes."

But, when feeling lonely or depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: "For my sake was the world created."

I think of this teaching especially at this season, as I reflect back on the long year that has come to an end, and the long stretch of days that lies before us in the new year.

Our lives sit on the foundation of these two perspectives, in between these two sacred Torah teachings.

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In this year in particular, these two perspectives can be acted on by something else in Jewish teaching. We have a rich tradition of blessings, prescribed to be said on every occasion and event imaginable. There's even a teaching that urges us to say 100 blessings a day.

The question is, what is the right blessing to say for this particular Rosh HaShana?

On the one hand, there is the familiar blessing *shehechianu*. This blessing is one of thanksgiving and celebration: *Blessed is the Source of Life, who has brought us to this moment.*

On the second hand, there is a less familiar but very important blessing known as *Gomel*. This is a blessing to be said after one survives a perilous situation. In earlier ages, when travel was much more dangerous, it would have been said after every journey. It can be said after coming through an illness or surviving an accident.

*Blessed is God, who rewards the undeserving with goodness, and who has rewarded me with goodness.*

So, here we are, 18 months after the onset—or maybe I should say onslaught?—of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is this a moment of celebration—of *shehechianu*? Or is this a moment for *Gomel*, recognizing the tragedy and the loss?

And, of course, we are not done, so perhaps there needs to be another option.

In one recent discussion about the pandemic, I heard a simple description that I found to be incredibly powerful. As a baseball fan, I liked the analogy, but I think it is universal. The person offered that it's like we were coming into the 9th inning of the game...only to discover that we were playing a double header.

I want to speak this morning in recognition of the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty that is so dominant.

Even before the pandemic began, we had a crisis in our community. So many were living with challenges to their mental health—and didn't have the words to describe it or the wherewithal to address it. And so many were living without the confidence that there were safe spaces and safe people for them to come to and speak about their mental health.

Our temple is a safe place. Rabbi Tulik and I, and everyone in temple leadership, are ready to walk with you on the journey to emotional and spiritual wellness. Your full self will be valued and celebrated here.

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My friend Dan Nichols, a gifted singer and songwriter, whose music is familiar to many of you, wrote a very special prayer several years ago. I turn to it often, for myself and in support of others. I don't know that he was thinking of the Simcha Bumen teaching when he wrote the prayer, but I hear it within the lyrics.

*"I thank You for my life, body and soul  
Help me realize I am beautiful and whole  
I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too  
I will live each day as a gift I give to you."*

We are gathering today, at the start of this brand new year, in a world that is oh so broken. I hope we are able to taste the sweetness of the honey and sense the possibility in the days that lie ahead.

But I don't want to speak today just as a happy cheerleader...don't worry! Everything's going to be ok!

I speak today to say that I see your pain. I join you in mourning the empty spaces at the table. I know that there is an insidious quiet that has crept into many of our homes, caused by the absence of the voices of loved ones that have been taken away. I join you in feeling the heavy weight of uncertainty that is forced down like a vice on our shoulders because of this global affliction.

I recognize that there is an urgent need to address our emotional and mental well being. Let us say it as loudly and clearly as possible. If you are someone living with anxiety, depression, grief, developmental differences, PTSD, dementia, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia...you are a valued member of this sacred community. And that is only a partial list. We thrive through the uniqueness of each and every person who joins their life with the life of this holy congregation.

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*Ayekah?* Where are we? We are at a critical juncture, one where we must answer: we are here, doing the best we can, and resolved to be a healing presence for all those who are not whole and at peace.

There are many paths to healing and wellness. I believe the path begins when we reach into that pocket and recognize that we are each created with unique potential and beauty and importance.

The path begins when we realize that our goal need not be perfection, but rather working to see that there is beauty and brokenness woven together into the fabric of our souls.

This is work that is not just private and personal, but work that relies on our stepping up to be a healing presence for those around us.

In the litany of plagues in our broken world, isolation is one that we have the power to abolish from the list.

It is an unfortunate reality that sometimes, we can feel the most alone when we are with other people...and they don't really see us. And we have the power to change this. We have the power to work on really seeing the people we encounter. We have the ability to be a healing presence in this community, when we strive to truly see and understand the people around us.

In the spiritual realm, this is part of a tradition that is nearly 500 years old. There is a set of teachings associated with Rabbi Isaac Luria, part of the roots of the tradition of *tikkun olam* .

Most often, we associate this expression, repair of the world, with the work of social justice. But there is a second aspect to this, part of Luria's imagining of the creation of the world. In the beginning, God, who fills every bit of space in the world, contracted to make space for human life—and the creative ability and free will that defines us. In that act of making space, it was imagined that some of the Divine Light was contained within a set of vessels...which were not adequate to contain the light. The vessels shattered and scattered the light through the world.

So, in following this mystical tradition, the work of tikkun olam isn't just about healing the world when there is injustice, but is about healing the world by committing ourselves to finding and collecting the Divine Light.

We need to live recognizing that there is a spark of the divine in each and every one of us. And some of those sparks are not shining brightly, because of the cloud of grief and anxiety, the shadow of suffering and struggling in this broken world.

So, let us start by working to let those around us know that we see their spark. For some, that reassurance may be enough. For others, they may need the support of rabbis or counselors or therapists or doctors or other mental health professionals who can help with the specialized work of healing.

For all of us, let us not ignore that while it is a brand new year, we are carrying the challenges of the old year with us. And that weight is too much to bear alone.

So if we are moved, let us say *shehechianu*, for we have reached the milestone of this sacred occasion. And for those who are ready, let us say *gomel*, for we have come very far through a terrible time.

But let us also affirm that neither of these blessings should imply completion of our sacred task, which is to heal the world, one soul at a time.

And, whether we raise our voice today to recite a blessing or to proclaim that we're just not ready to do so, let us ensure that none of us raise our voices alone.

There is beauty and brokenness in every one of our souls. I pray today that we will recognize the selflessness and extraordinary resilience that is implanted within us, the ability to see what is broken and to offer ourselves up as a healing presence. Today, and in all the days of this coming year, we can help create beauty, healing, consolation, and hope.

I pray today for a Shana Tova, a year that takes each one of us and all of us together on a unique and needed path to wholeness, holiness, and peace.

*Ayekah?* Where are we? We are here, together, with everything we need to heal the world.