

“In the Spiritual Gym”
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The other day, I picked up yet another exercise machine to add to my collection. I’m sure I’m not the only one who has more than one exercise machine in my home. Some of us have treadmills. Others have ellipticals or exercise bikes. Some have one of each.

When I get a new one of these machines I tend to use it a lot for a while—but then, it gets moved to a less well-trafficked area of my house. Eventually, it finds its way to the basement. Sometimes I wonder whether, subliminally, I find certain machines more attractive than others because, deep in my subconscious, I’m already calculating how much more laundry can hang from them than from their rivals.

I’m sure I’m not the only one who does this. The reason is simple. Like all of us, I know I need exercise. I know it’s important. I know that, on a certain level, I enjoy it. At the very least, I enjoy *having done* it, even if the exercise itself isn’t so much fun.

But, like all of us, I’m busy. And there are other things I’d rather do in my spare time. And so, after awhile, I drift away. My commitment wanes. The dust gathers on the machine—until something happens to renew my interest. It could be a change in the weather, a change in my health, or something random, like a conversation with someone that renews my interest, my drive, my commitment.

I’m always amazed when the High Holidays come around. Particularly in a year like this, when they come so early in the season; even as recently as last week, it was hard to believe that they were really coming. There wasn’t a lot of activity around the shul last week: and now, suddenly, the chairs are set up, the books have been placed on them, and we’re here, ready to go.

Why are we here?



I think we're here because, on some level, we know that this is good for us. It's good for us to pause, to reflect, to re-connect with our tradition, with our community, with ourselves, and with God—not necessarily in that order. We know that another year has gone by; a year of hopes and dreams, a year of accomplishments—and maybe disappointments as well. Maybe there have been happy occasions, like births or weddings, and maybe sadness as well. Something deep down inside us reminds us that here is where we should be, in the synagogue, to process all of this in the presence of family and friends and community, and to reflect on where we're going.

The rabbis call it: *heshbon ha-nefesh*—soul searching, or soul examination. We should do this all the time, of course, but the rabbis tell us that this season of the year is the most auspicious time for it. And so we come.

Some of us daven every day. Some of us daven once a week, or once a month. But some of us find ourselves in synagogue maybe only two or three times a year, for a simcha or some other special occasion. And so many of us, I would venture to say, are rusty. We haven't been exercising ourselves spiritually during the year. And as we know when we jump back on the bike after a winter of inactivity, we can tire easily and find it tough to get back on the bike the next day.

My advice is to start slow, to go slow, and to take things in small doses. The liturgy of the High Holidays is the fullest and richest in the entire year. Don't bite off more than you can chew comfortably. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

The other day in shul we were discussing Psalm 27, which we will shortly recite. It's the psalm that we recite from the beginning of the month of Elul (that we just concluded a few minutes ago) through to Hoshannah Rabbah, the end of the holiday of Sukkot. I chose that as a focus for our study because it occurred to me that many of us read it far too quickly and don't get a chance to reflect on its words. I wanted to study the psalm, from its opening line, "*The Lord is my light and my salvation, Whom shall I fear?*" to its last line, "*Hope in the Lord. Be strong and courageous. Hope in the Lord.*" I knew I had to condense my presentation. After all, to study that psalm in depth would take at least an hour. But we were in shul, it was Shabbat morning; I could take about 20 minutes, but not much more than that. And so I did condense my words; but I did manage to cover the entire psalm, from beginning to end. I, for one, thought it was an interesting exploration of an interesting and important psalm.

A funny thing happened at Kiddush. A number of people came up to me to follow up on our discussion. (That isn't the funny part.) What was at first puzzling to me is that virtually all of the comments focused on the meaning of that first phrase, "*The Lord is my light.*" We had spent a few moments at the very beginning of my *d'var torah* talking about the many associations people have with that image. At Kiddush, one person pointed out that, in ancient days in particular, but even today as well, light is a form of protection. That was a point that hadn't been made in our discussion.

Another person challenged an interpretation I had shared in my *d'var torah*. I had said that a person who says, "*The Lord is my light*" must be comparing his current situation to "sitting in the dark." This person said, "No. It's possible to be in a bright state of being that you might describe as "light," and yet to realize, with gratitude, that the source of the light is God."

It dawned on me that although I had *opened up* the possibility of talking about the meaning of that metaphor of God as light, that's all I had done. Because I had rushed through the psalm, I hadn't allowed enough time to fully un-pack its meaning for people. I could have limited my discussion to that one phrase, and we wouldn't have run out of things to say.

High Holiday services don't lend themselves to too much slowing down. As a community, we start on page X, and we move through the prayer book, finishing off on page Y. If we were to stop and meditate on every image like "*The Lord is my light,*" we would be here all day long, and well into the night. So, collectively, we can't do that.

But each of us, individually, can do just that—or something similar. We can follow along, but when we come to an image or a phrase that piques our curiosity, satisfies a certain inner need, or provokes a strong response, we can and should stop and meditate on that. We should consider our High Holiday services opportunities to be exposed to many, many possibilities for spiritual connection. Surely, at least one of them will resonate with us. Surely, we can find it meaningful to explore at least one of them.

And so, let me invite you to do what I've suggested: to let your mind—and your heart—wander a bit during these High Holidays. Make good use of your time in this spiritual gymnasium that we maintain here. Try out the machines. And if you find one you like, that seems to exercise the spiritual muscles that need stretching

or strengthening, stick with it. Don't worry if you find yourself getting out of breath. Just pause and catch your breath—and then move on to the next machine.

Let me wish you and your loved ones a *Shanah Tovah u'M'tukah*, a good and a sweet 5771.

Amen.