

**“Yom Tov and Yom Norah—Day of Joy and Day of Awe”**  
**First Day of Rosh Hashanah, 2003**  
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Harvey Cox is a professor of religion at Harvard University. He himself is not a Jew but a few years ago, he married a Jewish woman and began, with her, to observe Jewish holidays. In a recent book, he describes what this has been like for him. For example, in one chapter, he writes that throughout his life he had always found something “acutely unsatisfying” about the way he and his family commemorated the New Year. As a child, he looked forward to being allowed to stay up until midnight on December 31. The next morning, while his parents slept late, he would find the hats and noisemakers they had brought home from their merry-making the night before. When he became an adolescent, he would look forward to the dancing and the singing, and even, to a certain extent, the drinking. But all along he felt that there was something missing. What was missing, he came to realize, was “the apprehensiveness, even trepidation, that gnaws at each of us with the realization that our time is limited, another year has passed, and a new one is beginning.” (Harvey Cox, *Common Prayers*, p.26) Harvey Cox came to find that depth of feeling, not on New Year’s Day, but on Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah is a particularly festive day in the Jewish calendar. We dress up in our finest; we come from near and far to be together in shul. We serve and we enjoy festive meals. The tables are set with the finest dishes, and the food is ample and tasty. Sweetness is the theme of the day: apples and honey, challah and honey, honey cake—we enjoy all of these on this day.

And yet, Rosh Hashanah is also something entirely different.

All we have to do is to examine the liturgy, and we see that Harvey Cox was right—there is that sense of concern, there is that focus on the tentativeness and tenuousness of life on Rosh Hashanah. Again and again, we pray that God should “remember us for life”—a prayer that suggests that we’re worried lest he not. We recite the words of the U’netaneh Tokef—words that speak of a book of those destined to live, one for those destined to die in the year to come, and about how God is deciding, on this very day, which one we belong in. There’s deep anxiety, worry and fear in our liturgy on this day, wherever we turn. And as we sit here in



shul, we can't help but think of these issues. We think of those who may have sat here with us last year, or the year before. We think of how we—every single one of us—are getting older. And we wonder how much longer we ourselves will be privileged to live.

Rosh Hashanah presents us, then, with an odd duality. On the one hand, there is “Happy New Year,” a greeting that many of us offer each other, with sincerity and with joy. On the other hand, there is “*L’shanah tovah tikateivu*,”—“May you be inscribed for a good year,” expressing however subtly our concern that we might not be so inscribed. In fact, one traditional greeting at this season is “*L’shanah tovah ... l’altar*,”—“May you be inscribed—for a year of health, life, and happiness—right away—as if to say, “if not sooner, before God can change his mind!”

This duality is as old as the Bible and the Talmud. On the one hand, the Bible calls the first day of the seventh month a “*mo’ed*,”—that is, a festive season of the year. It’s listed with the other festivals—Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot—in the lists of holidays given in Leviticus (chapter 23) and in Numbers (chapter 28). We even have a case in the Bible when Rosh Hashanah is explicitly called festive. In the book of Nehemiah we’re told that when Ezra read the Torah before the people on Rosh Hashanah, and they began to weep --presumably because they realized that they hadn’t been observing it properly—Nehemiah said to them, “Today is holy; you mustn’t mourn or weep. Instead, “*l’chu ichlu mashmanim u’shtu mantakim*”—“go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and provide food for those who don’t have it. Don’t be sad (Nehemiah 8:10). And in the Palestinian Talmud, the Yerushalmi, we’re told explicitly that we’re supposed to “dress up in white garments, trim our beards—if we have them—, cut our nails, and *ochlin v’shotin u’smeichim*”—eat and drink and be joyous.” (J. Rosh Hashanah 1:3)

Yet, already in the Rabbinic period it was understood that Rosh Hashanah was our day of judgment. On Rosh Hashanah, the Mishnah says, all creatures pass before God, one by one. (M.Rosh Hashanah 1:2) In the Talmud, we are told that even though the festive psalms of Hallel are chanted on all the other major Jewish holidays, and on the first days of every other month of the year, they are not to be recited on Rosh Hashanah. A midrash explains why. According to the midrash, God’s ministering angels ask Him the question: Why is it that Jews don’t recite the psalms of Hallel on Rosh Hashanah or on Yom Kippur? And God answers, “Is it possible that the King should sit on the throne of Judgment, with the Books of Life and the Books of Death open before Him, and Israel should be singing a song before Me?” (B.Arachin 10b).

Maimonides expands on this explanation. “These days,” he says, referring to Rosh Hashanah, “are days of worship and submission, fear and awe, days of repentance (*teshuvah*) and supplication, atonement and forgiveness. With all these, where’s the place for frivolity and joy?” (Commentary on the Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 4:7)

Given this perspective, it is not surprising that some thought that these should be gloomy days, days of fasting and self-sacrifice. The halachah forbids that (see S.A., O.H. 597:1) but nonetheless there is an awareness that Rosh Hashanah isn’t quite like every other holiday. After all, in the kiddush that we recite on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, we don’t refer to Rosh Hashanah as one of the “*moadim l’simchah*,”—“holidays for joy.” Instead, we simply call Rosh Hashanah, Yom Ha-Zikkaron, the day of Remembrance. And instead of saying as we do on the festivals, “*u’moadei koshs’cha, b’simha u’v’sason hinhaltanu*,”—instead of mentioning that God has bequeathed to us “holy festivals in joy and happiness,” we simply say, “*u’dvarcha emet v’kayam la-ad*,”—“Your word is eternally true and firm”—an expression of acceptance of the divine will.

But if we are to think of Rosh Hashanah as a time when all our sins lie revealed before God, a time of judgment for us, how can we be happy at all? How is it that we Jews have maintained this odd and seemingly unstable dual character of Rosh Hashanah to this day?

The other day, I happened to pass a young fellow who had just been pulled over by a police officer, who was slowly and dutifully writing out a traffic ticket. The driver—who looked as if he were barely old enough to drive—looked very unhappy. We don’t know the full story, but we can use our imagination: Was he late for an appointment? Was he wondering what he was going to tell his parents when he returned the car home? Probably. Whatever was going through his mind, he was not happy. It was a picture of unmitigated disappointment and foreboding.

How is it that we Jews, as we visualize ourselves in the divine courtroom on Rosh Hashanah, before the Judge of all judges, how is it that we can still be happy at all? After all, we haven’t behaved perfectly during the past year. It’s all too easy to think of God as that cop writing out that ticket—a ticket we know we deserve to receive. How and why do we hold on to both of these seemingly irreconcilable feelings: joy and trepidation?

Well, for one thing, we have survived. We are here today. How often do we take the time to acknowledge that miracle? True, those of us who pray the weekday

prayers every day do recite (in the modim brachah in the amidah) our thanks to God “for the miracles that daily attend us.”

Even if we do that, though, it makes sense that we would want to stop and pause at this time each and every year and realize and appreciate the fact that we have lived for yet another year. We have lived to see new life arise—perhaps within our families; certainly, within the community. We’ve lived to see children, maybe grandchildren, get a little older. Some of us have suffered losses; some of us have had painful experiences in our lives; some of us have been disappointed by our loved ones or by our friends. But, by God, we’ve lived! We’re alive! We have the opportunity to enter 5764, an opportunity that instinctively we know we should never take for granted.

Second, so long as we are alive, there is hope. Even the possibility of life, health, and well-being in the days, maybe the weeks, maybe the years ahead is a source of joy and gratitude—or should be. We have the opportunity to make choices. We don’t have to live our lives in any way we don’t want to. We have the freedom to do the right thing—as early as today.

Finally, Rosh Hashanah must have both joy and trembling in it, because that’s the Jewish approach to life. In this respect, Rosh Hashanah is like every other day. Every day we have reason to tremble; and every day we have reason to be joyful.

In the face of such uncertainty, our tradition has evolved a dual approach: on the one hand, we should be sober, reflective, concerned. And on the other, we must also rejoice in our lot. We must focus on what it is we can and should do differently in the year ahead. And be grateful if and when we are granted the opportunity to make such changes.

Tomorrow we will blow the shofar. Many years ago, I lived in an apartment in Cleveland Circle. We had a superintendent who was an extremely quiet man. We barely ever spoke. One day, he came up to make a repair. As he was leaving, he saw our shofar, which we kept on top of a bureau. It’s a large Yemenite shofar from Israel, similar to the one which our shofar blower will be using tomorrow. Suddenly, our “super” stopped and admired it.

“Wow,” he said, “what’s this? A horn?”

“Sort of,” I said, surprised to have heard the sound of his voice.

“This probably makes quite a sound,” he said. “You should blow it on New Year’s Eve!”

We do, of course, blow the shofar on the New Year. But it’s on our New Year. The reason why the shofar works so well, I think, is that it is—but it is also more than—a “Happy New Year” horn. It expresses that extraordinary duality I’ve attempted to sketch this morning.

On the one hand, it is a cry of alarm or distress. “Can the shofar be blown in the city and the people not tremble?” (Amos 3:6)

On the other hand, the sound of the shofar is uplifting. It heralds, after all, the Messianic Age. It’s a cry of hope. It’s triumphant.

As Harvey Cox puts it, “The shofar, since it is wordless, can both scream in terror and shout for joy with the same breath. Nothing else is worthy of the beginning of a whole new year in the only life we will ever have.” (Common Prayers, p. 39)

As we face, with a certain amount of fear and trembling, the challenges that lie ahead, may we approach the New Year with joy as well.

Let us pray for life and for blessing in the year ahead.

Let us pray that we will deserve whatever life, whatever blessing, may come our way in the year ahead.

And let us hope that we will appreciate, and express our appreciation for, those gifts by performing many, many *mitzvot* in the year ahead.

*L’shanah tovah u’m’tukah tikateivu v’teikhateimu*—may each of us be inscribed for a good and a sweet year.

*Amen.*