

בראשית

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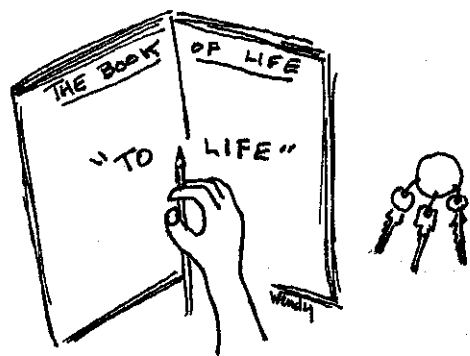
BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Tishrei 5759/September 1998

SOUL POLISH

Keys For A Sparkling New Year

by Dr. Rick Shields



"THE KEYS TO THE BOOK OF LIFE"

Did you ever ask yourself why you were created? What is life's purpose? Answers to these penetrating questions may be found by searching for the inner meaning of what Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year is all about.

On Rosh Hashana we celebrate you. That's right—YOU! Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the creation of the human being. Just as a storekeeper periodically checks the status of his inventory, so too Hashem checks how His creation is doing. The human being is the spiritual crown of creation in whom the Almighty invested a Divine soul, along with the gift of free choice. Being created in G-d's image means that we have the potential and obligation to emulate our Creator and his virtues of truth, goodness, kindness etc. *(cont. on p. 2)*

THE JEWISH NEW YEAR -

More than Just Dipping Apple in Honey

by Andrea Snyder

"Dip the Apple in the Honey," are the opening words of a song sung by Jewish children around the world, as Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year approaches. As a child, I remember being under the impression that once you dipped the apple in the honey, you have fulfilled all obligations associated with Rosh Hashana. Sure, I went to synagogue and ate festive meals with my family, but to me, my Rosh Hashana was complete once that apple went into the honey.

I thought that the dipping was all I needed to do in order to have a sweet and good year. Ah, I had so much to learn. As I furthered my Jewish education, I realized what a powerful day Rosh Hashana really was. *(cont. on p. 2)*

HOW TO REACH THE THOUSANDTH FLOOR

by Rachel Rosenbaum

The wailing cry of the ram's horn piercing the air, marks the arrival of the month of Elul, and heralds the arrival of the High Holidays. Each year, we resolve to change, perhaps to perfect a character trait, or simply to break a bad habit. Unfortunately, much of the time we fail to live up to our resolutions. What leads us astray? How can we avoid this trap? Furthermore, if we subsequently return to our old ways, does the process of repentance in and of itself possess inherent value? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in his book of philosophy and ethics *Michtav May'Eliyahu*, pinpoints the reason for our "relapses" – a lack of true remorse. Many people, when inspired by emotion, truly desire to repent *(cont. on p. 3)*

THE JEWISH NEW YEAR...(cont. from p. 1) I found out that Rosh Hashana cannot be correlated to the secular new year, in terms of celebration. Rather, Rosh Hashana was a Day of Judgement, when the Jewish people and, indeed, all of humankind, are judged by G-d for our past actions, and our future is decided.

The feelings evoked as Rosh Hashana approaches, as well as on Rosh Hashana itself, are best described by the parable of the man who was summoned to appear before the King at the royal courthouse. From the moment the man learned that he was to appear before the King, he began to examine his past actions and to regret and repent for what he had done wrong. When the day of his appearance arrived, he bathed, shaved, and dressed in his finest clothing, and humbly approached the King. With great awe and respect he began to beg for forgiveness from the King for all that he had done, hoping against hope that his misdeeds would be forgiven.

We are like that man. Elul, the month that precedes Rosh Hashana, serves as *our* time to prepare for our visit to the King, and is therefore a month marked by repentance. Then on Rosh Hashana, we approach G-d and proclaim His kingship during the morning service in a prayer called "*HaMelech*" (The King). By acknowledging G-d as our King, we show that He is also our ruler and judge.

As I gained further understanding into the meaning of Rosh Hashana, and understood what being judged meant, I needed to discover why Rosh Hashana is our Day of Judgement. I learned that it was on Rosh Hashana that G-d completed the creation of the world, and that it could now be judged by G-d. Judging is a sign that G-d cares about us. If He did not, then He would simply ignore us. On Rosh Hashana remembering that we are being judged by G-d allows us to feel close to G-d. If someone takes an interest in you, then you take an interest in them.

Rosh Hashana was also the day that Adam was judged for his sin of eating the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. On that same day, he repented for his sin and was forgiven. We too, are meant to use this day as an opportunity to repent for our sins. The Talmud in tractate Rosh Hashana states, "A person is judged only in accord with his present actions." When a person is in a mode of repentance on Rosh Hashana, he/she is judged that way. A person is not judged based on the sins of the past year, but rather on the attitude one exhibits on Rosh Hashana.

I still dip the apple in the honey, but I no longer believe that this action is the essence of Rosh Hashana. I realize now that, for two days, I have the opportunity to stand in person before the King of Kings and repent for any misdeeds I have committed during the past year. I use Rosh Hashana as a time to examine my relationship

with G-d, as well as my relationships with others.

Now I know that whether or not I have a good year is based upon my actions and attitude on Rosh Hashana, rather than dipping a piece of apple in honey.

Andrea Snyder is a Regional Program Coordinator for The National Jewish Outreach Program.



"IT'S MORE THAN 'MOTHER GOOSE'
JUDAISM"

SOUL POLISH...(cont. from p.1) On Rosh Hashana G-d checks to see how well we are doing. Were we more godlike this year, or more selfish, greedy and egotistical? Human beings were created in the most miraculous way. They have a physical body, like an animal, but also have a little chunk of G-d in them which is called the "soul." These two forces directly confront each other, and therein lies our test throughout life. The question is: Are we riding the animal, or is the animal riding us? Are we in control of our desires, temptations and emotions, or are we enslaved by them? The Jewish view of life requires that we strive in this world for a more exalted spiritual existence. Our goal is to sanctify and elevate ourselves and the physical world by fulfilling G-d's plan, by keeping the *mitzvot* (commandments).

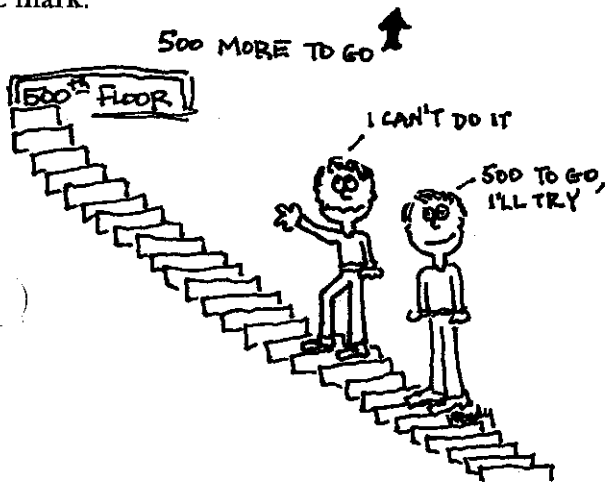
The *mitzvot* are food for our souls, they are the bridge that connects us, and allows us to draw near, to our Creator. This is the essence of a happy, meaningful existence, and can only happen when we have an ongoing relationship with our Creator. Without it, the Jewish soul searches aimlessly to fill the void, but continues to come up empty-handed. So when we stop and make a blessing before eating an apple, we sanctify the physical world and connect with our Creator, the ultimate source of all blessings. When we study Torah, we nurture our spiritual existence and learn how G-d wants us to live.

Rosh Hashana affords us the opportunity to do a sincere and honest introspection and evaluation of the past year. What was our relationship with our fellow human beings like? Where can we improve? How can we live a little more spiritually in the coming year? Through this process we can, hopefully, begin to see and cherish the wisdom and beauty of the Jewish New Year. It's a special time to repair and rebuild our relationship with G-d and with humanity, and live a more noble life in the coming year.

(cont. on p. 4)

HOW TO REACH... (cont. from p. 1) and come closer to G-d, but once the emotional "high" wears off, they revert to their former ways. A person who *truly* desires to repent, must first realize the enormity of the damage caused by the sin, and then take concrete steps to prevent it from happening in the future.

What kind of "concrete steps" can we take to ensure that this year's Rosh Hashana resolutions will not also be next year's? There is a traditional Jewish solution; a Hebrew calendar. You need not be some kind of office whiz, to keep track of the Jewish months! According to Jewish tradition the first day of each month, "Rosh Chodesh," is also called "Yom Kippur Katan," a "mini Day of Atonement." In some transcendental way, the first day of each month shares some of the same spiritual qualities of Yom Kippur. It is a propitious day to honestly assess whether our current behavior is in line with the sterling image of ourselves we presented on Yom Kippur. In this way we can never stray too far from the mark.



However, if because of our wayward behavior this exercise in self-assessment occurs too infrequently, G-d has given us yet another, more frequent, opportunity to monitor our progress. The Hebrew word for praying is "*L'hitpallel*," in English "self-judgement." Each time we pray, we are supposed to take an honest look at ourselves and evaluate whether we, as finite beings, are indeed worthy to connect with the Infinite. If we keep this thought in mind, prayer can be a valuable tool to keep us on track throughout the entire year.

Teshuvah (repentance) of this caliber is no simple process. To go from one extreme to another takes immense willpower. But what if, as often happens, repentance is followed by a relapse? If one knows that he/she will almost invariably commit the same sin in the coming year, does not the repentance itself smack of insincerity? In normal circumstances, it would appear to be so, but not in G-d's relationship with us. Here, we must realize two things. Firstly, G-d values not only the end result (i.e., the repentance), but the *process* of Teshuvah, which in and of itself is meritorious. The very

fact that an individual sees the truth and desires to change, even for a fleeting moment, is credited by the Heavenly tribunal to the person's account, even if he/she does not succeed in reaching the goal.

The second thing we must remember, is that past failure does not indicate future failure. Like a general in the army, we must explore different strategies, until finally, we achieve success. Each time a person wages war against the evil inclination, although he/she may not succeed in fully conquering that enemy, it is indeed weakened, until at last, after many attempts, the individual's cumulative efforts achieve full victory. In addition, G-d, noting our many failed attempts, may feel at this point, that our persistence demonstrates true sincerity. Although, we, on our own, may lack the willpower to resist sin, G-d then bestows upon us a special strength which enables us to succeed.

There is an interesting parable which may help elucidate this concept. A powerful and wealthy king once declared a contest. For one day only, the tallest building in the land, one thousand stories tall, would be open to the public. Until now, no one had ever reached the top floor. On that day, all contestants would have a chance to attempt the climb, and anyone who succeeded in reaching the thousandth floor, would be rewarded with honor and riches.

Only the best and the boldest signed up, and on the assigned day, they began their arduous journey to the top. When they reached the 100th floor, many weary contestants began to drop out. By the time they reached the 300th floor, only ten were left, and finally by the time they reached the 400th floor, only two remained. When the two had climbed an additional hundred flights to the 500th floor, the first weary climber turned to the second and gasped "This is an impossible mission! Even if I can make it up another hundred flights, I'll never, never make it to the thousandth floor. I might as well quit now. This task is beyond my abilities." But the second climber continued on, saying "Even if I have only the strength to climb one more flight of steps, I will persist until I have spent all my energy."

Just as he reached the top of the 501st floor, and was about to collapse from exhaustion, he noticed a little sign with an arrow. He took a closer look, and in small red letters, he read "Express Elevator - to the thousandth floor." "Well fancy that!" he exclaimed. "Who'd a thought" - he stopped in mid-sentence, deciding to conserve his energy. Invigorated, he hopped aboard the elevator to collect his reward.

G-d never asks us to complete the impossible task - only to begin. With these thoughts in mind, may you have an inspiring and meaningful Rosh Hashana.

Rachel Rosenbaum, from Teaneck NJ, is a senior at Touro College, majoring in Psychology, and works part time at NJOP

SOUL POLISH...(cont. from p. 2) Here are some tips to make the New Year a success:

1) **Wake Up:** Before the New Year in the month of Elul we begin to blow the shofar. The Rambam (Maimonides) teaches us that the shofar serves as an alarm, to wake us out of our spiritual slumber. Let the shofar blast motivate us to do Teshuvah (repentance).

2) **Get A Mentor:** Acquire a wise and insightful Rabbi or teacher to help guide you on your spiritual journey and familiarize you with the important laws and customs of Rosh Hashana.

3) **Repent:** The Sages teach us that during the month of Elul, "G-d is out in the fields", i.e. He is much more accessible to us and ready and willing to forgive. Don't let this exceptionally good time for repentance slip away. Learn more about the formula for repentance which includes a verbal confession of sins to G-d, a feeling of deep remorse and a resolve for the future to avoid these sins.

4) **Appease Your Fellow Human Being:** G-d will not forgive you until the person you wronged or harmed forgives you. Only then can you seek forgiveness from G-d. Ask your Rabbi for further details.

5) **Judge Others Favorably:** There is a principle in Judaism called *mida k'neged mida* (a measure for

measure). How you treat and judge others, will determine how the Heavenly Court will treat and judge you.

6) **Guard Your Tongue:** Most sins are committed through the tongue. Study the laws of proper speech, and use your tongue in the Divine manner for which it was given.

7) **Overturing the Evil Decree:** Judaism teaches that an evil decree issued by the Heavenly Court can be overturned by Teshuvah (repentance), Tefilla (prayer) and Tzedakah (acts of righteousness, charity) before the decree is sealed on Yom Kippur.

8) **Rejoice Over the Opportunity For A New Beginning:** Rosh Hashana is a time of trembling and joy. We tremble because it is an awesome day of judgment, and we feel joy because we trust in G-d's mercy. Can you imagine if there were no Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur each year, and after "120 years" each of us would stand before the Almighty with all our baggage and sins from all years past! These yearly house-cleaning intervals are an incredible act of *Chesed* (kindness) on the part of the Almighty.

All the best for a sweet, healthy and happy year.

Rick Shields, Ph.D., is a nutritionist residing in Queens, where he has taught Torah classes for NJOP, Project Identity, and the Holliswood Jewish Center. He is involved in starting and leading a new Beginners Service in Kew Gardens Hills, NY.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

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Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.

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