

Rabbi Amy Sapowith's Message
A Taste of the World to Come
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778

Some days are just sweeter than others. Some years are sweeter too. From one year to the next, you just can't be sure what might come up. This New Year, public opinion polls reveal that social class is up and people are more optimistic. Two years ago, just fifty-one percent of families polled put themselves in the middle or upper middle class. This year, that number reached sixty-two percent.ⁱ Also, for the first time in more than a decade, the majority of U.S. workers are satisfied with their jobs!ⁱⁱ Not as good as it could be, but still some welcome honey for our ears. On the first day of school, in the yeshivas, it was customary to add a drop of honey atop each letter of a student's chalk slate to teach the sweetness of learning. On Rosh Hashanah, we dip an apple into honey to express the sweetness of a new year.

Though it is unclear when or where the first apple was dipped, we can appreciate the symbolism of this ritual. A new year, we know, brings apprehension and some sadness as well as sweetness. We ask ourselves: what storms both natural and man-made are headed our way? We dip our worries into honey like a biscotti into coffee. The sugar soothes our fear and reassures us that life's pleasures are as ordinary as breakfast or a good-night kiss.

Diane Ackerman, author of the book called *A Natural History of the Senses* reports that the first recorded instance of sugar is in the Atharvaveda, a sacred Hindu text from 800 B.C.E. It describes a royal crown made of glittering sugar crystals. At that same time, 800 B.C.E., in *Eretz Yisrael*, the reigns of both King David and his son King Solomon had passed into history; ten of the twelve tribes of Israel had seceded from the

Davidic dynasty to form the northern kingdom of Israel, leaving the southern kingdom of Judah. That's where the word Judaism comes from. And in 800 bce, at the time of the Hindu crown of sugar, the prophet Amos would for the first time in the history of prophecy be preaching social justice on behalf of the poor and exploited. Some say revenge is sweet. Our tradition says justice is sweeter.

Seeking forgiveness and giving forgiveness are sweet. We call it repentance. In all its stumbling, stuttering, hesitating, heart-wrenching torment, repenting for things we would have done differently had we only known better frees us, helps us to relax, reassures us of our worth and our potential. This is the season when forgiveness wafts through our holiday kitchens, clings to our suit coats, and softens our criticisms. Repentance is sweet. It is a just dessert. There will even be seconds. For most things, we get another chance.

What are you sorry about? Some times it's obvious. Stinking obvious. You know that smell of organic matter rotting in the Tupperware, or seeping from the garbage pail that has not yet been emptied? Think of a sin like a good intention gone sour. It's that part of you that needs to be thrown out. Part of your better self, of your integrity, of your own value system that has begun to decay because you're still holding a grudge, or because you took out your frustration on your spouse or your children, or because you refused to support a good idea out of pure pigheadedness or because of politics. Maybe a bit of our ego needs to be dumped along with last month's lentil soup.

Tonight we celebrate the birthday of this world. A world of birth, growth, change and death. And we know from the first words of Genesis that God declared "Ki tov." That it is good. The light, the earth, the oceans, the sky, the plants, the animals, and

finally, even the people. God saw it all as good. Cycles of births and changes and deaths spiraling through the generations until we land in the goodness of Today. Of this evening. Of this world with its iron core. On the one hand, magnetic, and on the other, repellant.

We celebrate the birthday of the world and yet we live in many worlds. There is the world of relative calm here in Ashburn and of heightening alarm with regard to N. Korea. There is outreach to the post Harvey and Irma worlds of Houston, parts of Louisiana, Florida and the Caribbean Islands with Maria just hitting Puerto Rico. There is outrage in the face of a more vocal white supremacy. Sometimes it's painfully obvious what has gone sour.

Over the past year the Jewish community has been served many a spoiled dish. Jews are still being suspected of controlling the media and the banks and of seeking world domination; Israelis are called illegitimate colonial interlopers on our ancestral land and in some quarters all Zionists are considered racists. In a lamentable and baffling display of internecine hostility, a chief orthodox rabbi in Israel calls Reform Jews worse than Holocaust deniers for advocating for an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall. All the while Israel anticipates a three-front war, each proxy army armed and supported by Iran. At home, we have reignited our battle with institutional racism, we struggle for access to healthcare...the list goes on. Aware of the hostility, the urgency, and the high stakes, can we afford to dip an apple into honey? What chutzpah!

The Birthday of the world. Let's call it a day of global obstetrics. Did the rabbis realize the contradiction they inserted into the tradition when they declared Rosh Hashanah the birthday of the world? On this day of sacred rest, God is in labor. As most of us know, when women give birth, they often scream out. Can you imagine God

screaming before taking the world to his/her breast and admiring it? Can you imagine God screaming that the world is good? God is screaming tonight. And we are laboring for goodness.

In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Ackerman explains that humans detect sweetness on the tip of our tongues. Stick out your tongue at someone and you jab them with a sugar receptor. Had you only known. We are drawn to sweetness and go forth into the world seeking it and yet by all accounts, humans are genetically wired to overlook it. Our brains detect sweetness for every 1 part in 200. By comparison, we detect salt for every 1 part in 400, sour for every 1 part in 130,000 and bitterness in as little as one part in 2 million. This means that we are much quicker, 10,000 times quicker, to taste bitterness than sweetness. It's as if we are biologically driven to take the good things, the myriad blessings in our lives, for granted. We allow them to go undetected, unrecognized, underappreciated. We harp on our family members, we carp about our coworkers or clients, we needle and nag and gossip and gab finding a good day with much to recommend it inconsequential. We want it all right now, too impatient to weather the process. We ascribe malice to too many smiles. We wonder, are they laughing at me? Yet God looked at the world and said, "Ki tov." It is good. When faced with complicated situations bigger than any single one of us, finding goodness in family and friends and coworkers can empower us. There is at least a small piece of this world that we can keep positive. A pinprick on an atlas. "Children," says Adonai, "give me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle and I will widen it into an opening through which wagons and carriages will pass." Let's offer a needle's-eye worth of optimism too. It's the least we can do.

Distinguishing between bitter and sweet is essential to our well-being. To large degree, it is a matter of life and death. Most poison tastes bitter. Lest we inadvertently swallow poison and die, our bitter taste receptors, located on the back part of our tongue, act as a last life-saving defense, forcing us to gag and spit out any deadly venom before it can pass down our throats. But defense or no defense, some of us will insist on courting death. Here's an example. Eating the highly poisonous puffer fish is a rare Japanese sashimi specialty. The most highly respected chefs manage to leave-in the barest touch of the poison, just enough for the diner's lips to tingle from their brush with mortality. This dish appeals to diners who thrive on the brief flirtation with death, and a certain number of diners do die every year from eating this traditional dish. And though sashimi is likely not one of them, some behaviors we do have in our communities, like alcohol abuse, drug or gambling addictions, eating disorders, or uncontrolled and abusive anger really do put our lives and the lives of others at risk.

Many of our transgressions are not immediately life-threatening. They are not even obvious. Often times, they're hard to identify. So ask your child, your partner, your parent, your colleague. Have I hurt you in some way? Ask yourself. Then ask, "Am I giving myself the benefit of the doubt? Do I forgive myself? Find the goodness.

We may be biologically predisposed to take the sweet things in life for granted. Our headlines that blast us with every tweet and crime gone awry contribute and exacerbate the tendency to overlook what is positive. And we fear that God may do the same: overlook our goodness. That is why the rabbis tell us in the Talmud that on Rosh Hashanah the Almighty carefully watches us, searching for anything that might provide a favorable explanation for our deeds and even our misdeeds. A thorough inventory

includes the positive. We can be humbled by our goodness as well as by our shame. The times we have felt blessed; the times we gave people the benefit of the doubt; the contributions we've made to the well-being of our families, of the Jewish community, of our nation. We have Temple members right now serving our community and our country and I for one appreciate their sacrifices. It is up to each of us to create balance in our lives: to weigh our optimism with our skepticism; our appreciation with our criticism. God does not simply go looking for faults. God looks into every corner of our lives for the *z'chut*, the merit in that life. And while God's looking, we're parading: "Look God, here's my prayer, here are my charitable acts, here is my repentance, my regret and my new resolve!" While God's looking we're pleading: "Please God, find my goodness!" We plead with God to allow even our small amount of merit to outweigh our sins. That is why repentance weighs in on the side of goodness. Repentance is probably our most powerful, most potent quality we have going for us as humans. It seems cliché. Repent ye all! Repent! We've heard the prophetic call over and over again. But we tune it out. We call it Outdated. Overrated. Boring. We know it can be uncomfortable. Risky. Embarrassing. But this is a prophetic call not a pathetic one. Because what real choice is there? Do we want to make the most of our lives? Do we want to make the most of this world? Then what choice do we really have?

These Holy Days are not meant to be an evisceration but an excavation—less a brush with death than a reclamation of life. During this season, we stand against death, choosing life. We turn away from self-destructive behaviors. We collectively denounce actions that threaten our existence as human beings, as Jews, as Americans.

In George Orwell's political satire, *1984*, chocolate is described as "dull-brown crumbly stuff that taste[s]. . . like the smoke of a rubbish fire." His is a world where even sweetness has gone sour. It is against this state of affairs that we dip an apple into honey. Like the prophet Amos who preached shortly after the time that sugar crystals were first recorded, we protest the hate, the violence, the abusive power, the injustice. We take our apple, symbol of productivity, of fertility, of cycles and we dip it into the sweetness of the world to come. The world that we usher in this evening is the world that we are laboring for, amidst our screams of resistance, despite our internal battle with cynicism and doubt. The world we usher in and celebrate is the one we prepare for through our remorse and our repentance. It's the world that must emerge from our dreams and our discipline, a world built upon our ordinary goodness. We dip an apple into honey to celebrate goodness, for this world must give birth to a better one!

Keyn y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will. L'shanah tovah tikateivu v't'chateimu.

ⁱ Washington Post, Robert J. Samuelson, 9/4/17.

ⁱⁱ Washington Post, Jena McGregor, 9/5/17