

A Mirror for the Soul

Rosh HaShanah 5779 Alternative Morning Service

There's an apple tree in my backyard that produces fruit every few years. It's not a delicate, ornamental tree. It's a towering giant that drops bushels of apples at an alarming rate. Most of the fruit is inedible, mushy and distorted, riddled with hideous lesions and bruises, telltale signs that a pest or critter enjoyed a bite and moved on. Picking up the rotten apples is one of the more disgusting gardening chores (and yes, over the years my sons have been adequately compensated). Every now and then, we salvage a few apples safe for human consumption.

Most of us enjoy eating apples and honey to welcome the new year. It's a sweet custom, kind of messy but symbolically appropriate. The shape of the apple represents the cycle of life and the sequence of the calendar year; the sweetness of the syrupy honey embodies our hope for a future coated with contentment and happiness. But we know that life isn't always as enjoyable as a candied apple. Some days are fabulous, while others are riddled with obstacles and challenges, setbacks and sorrows. When we look at the custom of eating apples and honey through mature eyes, we see that is a metaphor for the ups and downs of life. Sweet honey, after all, is produced by bees that can sting and hurt us. Apples burnished to a brilliant sheen still can be rotten to the core.

I don't know about you, but I'm fussy when it comes to buying fruit. It has to be visually appealing. It has to feel right. It has to have the appropriate density and aroma. It's ironic how picky we are when it comes to making everyday decisions, how much physical and mental energy we expend deciding what to eat, what to read, what to watch, even what to wear. We rummage through our closets and drawers; we check and double check our appearance and ask ourselves, "Can I go out in public looking like this? Does it match? Does it fit? Do I look like a fool?" Ultimately, we take a thoughtful look in the mirror and consider, "Will this work for me?"

During the High Holy Days, we engage in a comparable exercise of thoughtful consideration. *Cheshbon hanefesh* is the annual ritual of examining our spiritual lives, of assessing our actions and attitudes, of accounting for our words and our thoughts, of assessing the status of our character. It's not an easy process and there aren't a lot of tangible tools to help. No Siris or Alexas. No mirrors for the soul. Until now!

Following the service, everyone will receive this journal and this postcard. They're from an organization called Reboot. Their goal is for each of us to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh* by participating in a 10Q. What's a 10Q? It's a ten-day program of reflection, reaction, and renewal. "Life's Biggest Questions Answered By You" is what's written on the cover. On

each page of this journal is a prompt to help you reflect on fundamental questions about your life. You can jot your responses in the booklet or enter them in a secure, personalized, vault online. You can answer one question or all ten questions. You can do it alone, with a friend, or with your family. The postcard is a letter to yourself, a mid-year checkup to see how the new year is going in your effort to live up to your most ideal you.

The 10Q journal is a modern approach to the ancient tradition of reflecting, reacting, and renewing during the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. If only *cheshbon hanefesh* was as simple a task as physically removing *chameitz* from our homes before Passover. See it and remove it. Unfortunately, brooms and dustpans won't help with *cheshbon hanefesh*. True soul-searching is more demanding. It assumes that the things we take for granted are the very things that require considerable examination and assessment. We all are fallible. We all make mistakes: sometimes by saying the wrong thing, sometimes by remaining silent; sometimes by behaving inappropriately, sometimes by not reacting at all. Self-reflection can make us more aware of how our deeds impact our own lives and affect the lives of others.

Scholars throughout the ages have suggested different methods for evaluating our past year to see where we should focus attention to better

ourselves. In 11th century Spain, Bachya Ibn Pakuda said: “*Cheshbon hanefesh*, spiritual account-taking, involves four steps: (1) being fully consciousness of one’s shameful acts and profoundly regretting having committed them; (2) determining to change one’s conduct; (3) candidly confessing one’s sins and earnestly supplicating God to pardon those sins; (4) committing to a change of heart. In 19th century Eastern Europe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Satanov published a book called *Cheshbon Hanefesh*. It’s a how-to manual with a step-by-step guide for introspection and self-understanding. It’s still in print. The on-line advertisement reads: “Lift yourself higher; transform yourself into the person you want to be!” The 10Q journal is a comparable tool to aid us in this process. Our honest responses can help us determine what we need to change and what we want to change in order to live more gently, more patiently, and more purposefully in the New Year.

You’ll notice on the cover of the journal a display of apples in different states of enjoyment. Some are whole, some are halved, some have small chunks bitten out, and some have large pieces missing. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, sometimes an apple is just an apple, but sometimes an apple is symbolic. Perhaps these apples represent various manifestations of life. Perhaps they exemplify the diversity of our day to day existence.

Perhaps they signify stages of physical growth and decline. Perhaps they denote ranges of emotions and psychological states of being. If you look closely, you'll see that most of the apples aren't whole. Perhaps this is a subtle reminder that we're imperfect, that each of us has faults and flaws despite outward appearance.

A few months ago, I watched Simon Schama's mini-series The Story of the Jews. Schama presents a fascinating snapshot of Jewish communities worldwide from 1000 BCE to the current day. I wonder how future generations will depict us as Jews, collectively and individually. We live in the most privileged and enlightened era to date in Jewish history. Despite periodic incidents of anti-Semitism, we have nothing to worry about when it comes to our physical safety. Access to Jewish scholarship is unprecedented; so many sacred texts, once the provenance only of Rabbis and sages, are available in translation and online. The percentage of Jews who have realized the dream of visiting the land of Israel is at an unprecedented high. Here in the United States, we are blessed with the freedom to observe Jewish customs and traditions, and to worship freely and openly without social reprisal or government persecution. I wouldn't be surprised if future generations viewed this as a golden age.

Sadly, the luxury of assimilation has led to indifference when it comes to Judaism. Each of us has something about which we're stubbornly passionate, and we're easily frustrated when others don't share that passion. I'm shamelessly passionate about Judaism and Israel. Judaism is so rich, so multi-faceted. Judaism is a religion. It's a history. It's a culture. It's a people. It's a nation. It's a language. It's an ancient and modern homeland. Judaism is a smorgasbord of tastes and aromas. Judaism is a tapestry of colors: of blue and white, the colors of the Israeli flag; the sky blue *t'kheilet* thread on the *tzitzit*. Judaism is purple, crimson, and scarlet: the colors of the fine fabrics that adorned the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Judaism is silver: the color of the Torah ornamentals, the *yad* and the *rimonim*. Judaism is gold: the color of Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world. Judaism is a valuable inheritance more precious than any material object. Those can be damaged or lost or sold. Judaism is an identity. It's a way of thinking and feeling and connecting to God, to Torah, to community, and to the people and the land of Israel.

Our ancestors would laugh at (or be appalled by) the modern phenomenon that Judaism is an activity that can be scheduled into a time slot on a personal organizer (first we'd have to explain what a personal organizer is). But that's our reality. Just as we schedule time for exercise or

to watch our favorite shows or to dine at our favorite restaurant, we have to set aside time to study, time to worship, and time to engage in Jewish life.

The tale is told about a mechanical clock mounted to the top of the highest tower in the old town square. The clock was beautifully detailed. It had an astronomical dial, zodiacal rings, and a gilded calendar plate. As the townsfolk went about their daily business, they would glance upwards at the clock, then check the hour against their watches. On the off chance that there was an inconsistency, they would reset their watches to the correct time. After a while, a murmur of discontent was heard among the townsfolk. “The clock is so high. It literally is a pain in the neck to see. Wouldn’t it be better if the clock was reinstalled on a lower building? It would be so much easier to see.” Many of locals were so insistent on this proposal that after a series of focus groups, a town meeting was called. A unanimous decision was made to lower the clock. But then a funny thing happened. When people noticed a discrepancy between the time on town clock and on their watches, more often than not they summoned the clock master to adjust the time on the town clock. “After all, I know that I have the right time,” each said. Within a few months, the clock had been tinkered with so often that it simply broke down. After another round of focus groups and another town meeting, the decision was made that it was impractical to

keep fixing the clock. That is why the clock in the old town square now displays the correct time only twice a day. And while many were happy that they no longer had to keep checking and adjusting their watches, others felt the loss. They missed that old clock that connected one to all, the clock that kept everyone on the same rhythm of life.

We can't predict how time will unfold in this New Year. We hope that it will be a year of countless joys and unbridled contentment, but we know from experience that there will be struggles and disappointments. Thinking about life's big questions during the ten days of *cheshbon hanefesh* can help us deal with life's trials. So, take the time to reflect inward, to look backward, and to dream ahead.

As you walk away after the service with this booklet in your hands, I pray that it will be a useful prompt to call forth the spirit of this sacred day as you begin your journey in the New Year. The questions in this journal aren't etched in stone. The ink is erasable (if you rub hard enough). Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, "There is no great writing, only great rewriting." Rewrite the 10Qs so they're meaningful to you. You know which questions to ask. Challenge yourself. Then promise yourself to strive to live up to your ideals of a better you.

I pray that in this New Year the sweetness of the honey will overwhelm the sting of the bee, that contentment will diminish disappointment, and that comfort will alleviate sorrow. I pray that in this New Year each of us will feel a renewed eagerness for Jewish learning, a renewed connection to the Jewish community, and a renewed commitment to God, to Torah and to the people and the land of Israel. I pray that this New Year will be for all as personally satisfying and as spiritually fulfilling as Rosh HaShanah apples and honey on our tongues!