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## *ACTT Inspirational Reading for Yamim Noraim 5785*

### Table of Contents

Facing G-d on Rosh Hashanah .....	2
A Letter from G-d .....	4
Apples and Honey .....	6
Understanding the High Holidays .....	9
Rosh Hashanah's 4-Step Game Plan .....	11
Three Meditations When Hearing the Shofar .....	13
Perfectly Imperfect: The Secret of the Shofar .....	15
G-d's Alarm Clock .....	17
Yom Kippur and the Secret to a Happy Life .....	19
Yom Kippur: The Blessing of Failure.....	21
People Can Change .....	23
Four Myths about Forgiveness .....	26
Why Bats Sleep Upside Down and The Secret of Yom Kippur ...	28
The Good Gene .....	31
High Intensity Interval Spiritual Training .....	33
Shoes and the Secret of Yom Kippur.....	35

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# Facing G-d on Rosh Hashanah

by Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith 4 min read

## ***Three ways to prepare for your personal judgment day.***

How should we view ourselves standing before G-d on [Rosh Hashanah](#)?

A rather enigmatic piece of Talmud gives three descriptions about how each and every one of us passes before G-d. The Mishna says, “On Rosh Hashanah all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him like “*Bnei Maron*.” What does this mean? The Talmud offers three possible interpretations of the unusual phrase “Bnei Maron”:

1. All people pass before G-d like sheep being lead through a narrow door and counted one by one for tithing.
2. Individuals pass before G-d as if they were on a very steep and narrow mountain pass where one must carefully walk single file.
3. Every person passes before G-d like the soldiers in King David's army, walking single file on their way to war. ([Rosh Hashanah 18a](#))

Each interpretation teaches us a way to prepare for this most significant day.

### **1. Like sheep: counted, worthy, loved.**

In a world teeming with billions of people, does G-d really care about me and all the details of my life? In the big scheme of things, I'm just a small speck of dust. G-d surely has more important things than to examine my life and judge me.

Being compared to counted sheep comes to uproot the notion that G-d doesn't really care about my life. Something that is counted is considered important, valuable. G-d cares about you specifically. He is creating every molecule of your being; He is not only aware of you, He cares about you. He is rooting for you. You are not just a dot in the masses of humanity. You are G-d's child whom He loves, as a father loves his child.

How we make this more tangible? Try this exercise before Rosh Hashanah: Find some quiet time and take pen and paper and write a letter from G-d expressing His love and confidence in you, and how He is rooting for you. And for the cynical readers out there rolling their eyes at this suggestion – do it anyway. You will see it can be a very powerful and moving exercise.

### **2. Like a mountainous pass, all alone, with nowhere to hide**

The only way to traverse this narrow pass is by walking totally alone. There is no room for anyone else. On Rosh Hashanah, standing before G-d, there is only you. There are no friends to [hide behind](#), no society to get lost in, no excuses to rely on. It's only the real you, all your decisions, the potential left dormant, the tremendous dreams that were in reach but left unfulfilled. We hide behind a litany of excuses and layers of deception that distance ourselves from our true inner selves. We think everyone else is doing it, or the converse: no one else is doing it, so why should I be expected to? We think we're doing just fine since everyone tells us we're fine. But on Rosh Hashanah there is no one else; it's just you. It's the moment you need to confront who you really are.

So spend a few minutes and ask yourself: What excuses do you rely on to exempt you from unleashing your potential and becoming truly great?

### **3. Like King David's Soldiers, with a unique mission**

King David's soldiers were known to be the mightiest. They were not a just mass of people; each soldier had a unique mission that contributed to the army. On Rosh Hashanah G-d recreates the world and determines the annual allocation of resources. He judges each of us based on our unique mission and how it's affecting the nation. Where do we stand with our mission? Are we clear on our specific purpose? How driven are we to accomplish it? What do we need from the Almighty this year in order to accomplish it?

On Rosh Hashanah we will be standing before the CEO who has unlimited resources and he wants to hear our proposal that has the good of his company in mind. Now is the time to get the clarity about what we are committed to accomplishing this upcoming year and to evaluate how well this fits into what G-d wants from you.

AN effective tool to think about is to write down five of the most pleasurable moments you've experienced in life, moments when you felt most alive? Step back and see if you can articulate a common theme. Then ask yourself: What specific goals am I committing to this year to fulfill my personal mission?

This is a time for quiet introspection and reconnecting with your dreams and aspirations. Don't give up on them; the Almighty knows you can achieve great things and He's rooting for you.

*Based on an essay by Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, zt"l.*

# A Letter from G-d

by Rabbi David Begoun 5 min read

## ***A few things to keep in mind as Rosh Hashanah draws near.***

My precious child,

I want to wish you a shana tova, a sweet new year, and share with you a few things that I think you need you to know.

When I look at you I see something very different than what you see when you look in the mirror. You see yourself as you are now. But when I look at you I see who you can become. My primary goal is to help you grow from where you are now to where I know you can be.

Sometimes you are already challenging yourself and pushing yourself to become that person that I created you to become. So I just watch, with great nachas, and gently guide you in that direction. I orchestrate the events and experiences of your day-to-day life to ensure the maximum possibility of your achievement of that goal.

Other times, I have to present you with challenges and hurdles in order to convert your potential greatness into actualized excellence. I know that those moments are sometime painful, but if I don't challenge you then you will never actualize your potential. Please remember that I am closer to you during those moments than I am at any other time.

I want to tell you about one of my most important employees. He is the V.P. of Human Development. His name is *Yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, and he works for me 365 days a year, 24/7. The *Yetzer hara* gets a bad rap, but he is really your best friend. If it weren't for him, you would remain a nobody forever. I have empowered him to provide you with constant assaults and to approach you with a never ending barrage of creative tactics, but they only come to challenge you to grow and improve yourself. The *Yetzer hara* and I have only one goal for each encounter you have with him: we both want you to overpower him and show him what you are made of. Of course, once you do that I send him back with a more difficult obstacle to overcome, because that's how you really become great.

Here's some good advice: Speak to me. Often. And don't think I only understand Hebrew. I understand every language there is. So speak to me in your own language. And you don't have to wait to be in a synagogue; speak to me any time of day, no matter what you're doing – when you're driving your car, when you're taking a walk. Speak to me before you go to sleep. And most of all, speak to me on Shabbos. I am always available and I really am a good listener. In fact, I understand you better than anyone else (even yourself) because you are mine and I made you. So don't be shy, don't feel awkward; just pour your heart out to me and I promise I will respond.

And take advantage of [Shabbat](#); it's My special gift for you. Turn off your phone, computer, iPad and all those other gadgets and use the quiet time to celebrate your most important relationships: your relationship with Me, your relationship with yourself and your relationships with those special people that you are closest to. Even if you can't carve out the whole 25 hours for this purpose, at least use some of the day to connect to me.

I will let you in on a secret: I am talking to you all the time but I speak in a faint whisper. You have so many competing sounds, a cacophony of noises going on around you that drown me out. Find some quiet time and Shabbos and listen. You will be amazed what you hear.

Don't try to go through the journey of life on your own. I want you to find a mentor who can guide you and teach you and show you how to find Me and connect to Me. When you find that person, cling to him or her and don't let go. Make them teach you and guide you and take their advice to heart.

In addition, find someone to take this journey with. It is a lot easier to make this trek if you have someone with whom to share the journey. You can both make sure you are staying on target and heading toward your goals.

If you can, make the effort to come to the place on earth where My presence can most be felt. Spend some time in My city Jerusalem and imbibe the wisdom that oozes from the ancient walls there.

Rosh Hashanah is coming up. It's the birthday of mankind when I revise the plan of human history and write the next act for the year to come. Think about what major role you want to take. I am willing to let you play any role that you are committed to play. So think big and create a passionate vision of who you want to be this coming year. And on Rosh Hashanah, instead of counting the number of pages left in the *machzor*, talk to Me and tell Me what role you want to play.

The Book of Life will be open on that day and I am putting the pen in your hands. [Choose life.](#)

Love,

Your Father in Heaven who believes in you and loves you unconditionally.

# Apples and Honey

by Rabbi Berel Wein 8 min read

## ***Discovering the traditional origins and meaning of Rosh Hashanah's most famous foods.***

We're all familiar with the Jewish custom of dipping an apple into honey and eating it on the night of Rosh Hashana. All Jewish customs have Torah, historical and traditional origins, though many of them may be now somewhat obscure due to the passage of time and the circumstances of the long exile of Israel.

So why the apple? Is not placing honey on the piece of challah bread that we begin the meal with sufficient to symbolize a sweet year? What is the special symbolism of the apple that makes it the fruit that most graces our Rosh Hashana table?

The sophisticated doubters amongst us have stated that the apple is used because it is the fruit that was most available in all of the areas of the world of the Jewish exile. However, such reasoning begs the question and misses the entire point of the reasons for the preservation of Jewish customs. Jewish customs come to reinforce Jewish identity and memory. They serve to remind us of our special responsibilities and duties toward G-d and man. They reinforce our sense of solidity with all previous Jewish generations, and provide an effective method of transmitting our tradition and heritage to our children and grandchildren.

One of the tragedies of the alienation of many Jews currently from their heritage is their ignorance and non-participation regarding Jewish customs. Thus, the custom of the eating of the apple dipped into the honey on the night of Rosh Hashana does have a special traditional significance over and above the ready availability of the fruit at this season of the year. And it is this special significance of memory that enhances the beauty and even the sweetness of the custom.

### **Fruit of Affection**

One of the fruits to which the Jewish people are compared to in Solomon's Song of Songs is the apple. "As the apple is rare and among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved -- Israel -- amongst the maidens (nations) of the world."

The Midrash informs us that the apple tree puts forth the nub of its fruit even before the leaves that will surround and protect the little fruit at its beginning stage of growth are fully sprouting. The Jewish people, by accepting the Torah with the statement that "we will do and we will understand" -- placing holy action and observance of Torah commandments even before understanding and rational acceptance -- thereby imitated the behavior of the apple. Thus, the apple became a Jewish symbol, a memory aid, so to speak, to the moment of revelation at Sinai.

The apple also served to remind the Jewish people of their enslavement in Egypt and their deliverance from that bondage. Again, according to Midrash, the apple served as the fruit of affection between husband and wife during the long and painful period of abject slavery. It provided them with hope for the future and the determination to bring a future generation into the world, despite all of the bleakness of Jewish circumstance. The apple therefore also became the symbol of the Jewish home and family, of optimism for a brighter Jewish future, of the tenacity of Jewish spirit and determination.

### **Garden of Eden**

It is interesting to note that in general society, the apple is assigned the role of the fruit of temptation in the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The apple therefore became the symbol of human weakness and downfall, even of death itself.

However, the Talmud, when listing the possible "fruits" that may have been products of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, does not include apples in that list. **The "fruits" mentioned are wheat, figs and grapes.**

There is one Jewish source for an apple being that fateful fruit, quoted in Midrash, but it does not have the weight of authority that a statement in Talmud possesses. The Christian world, for unknown reasons, adopted the view of that Midrash and all Christian art, story and religious tradition for the last 1,500 years has given the apple a bad name.

Not so amongst Jews, where the apple retains its positive symbolism and has its place of honor on our Rosh Hashana table -- as a harbinger of a good, sweet and holy year for us all.

### **Hey Honey!**

Another favorite food staple in the Jewish home during the High Holy Day season is honey. Traditionally, from Rosh Hashana until after Sukkot, honey is served with every major meal. It is smeared on the bread over which we recite the "Hamotzi" blessing, the sweet apple is dipped into honey on the night of Rosh Hashana, sweet baked goods are baked with honey, and honey is used in the preparation of foods such as glazed carrots and sweet desserts.

Aside from the caloric disaster that this custom entails, one is really hard pressed to find a negative thing to say about honey.

The custom of honey on the Jewish table during the High Holiday period is an ancient and universal Jewish custom. It is already recorded in the works of the Babylonian Geonim in the 7th century, and probably dates back to even much earlier times. It is no exaggeration to say that Jews always seemed to possess a sweet tooth.

The obvious reason for the use of honey on our table at this time of the year is the symbolism of our desire for a "sweet new year." Sweet means dear, precious, enjoyable, satisfying, serene, secure and something most pleasing. Well, that about sums up our hopes and prayers for the new year, and therefore honey serves as our representative in expressing these fervent hopes and prayers.

However, honey represents more than sweetness per se. **It is one of the attributes of the Land of Israel which is described in the Bible as being a land that "flows with milk and honey."** Thus honey on the table always reminded the Jew wherever he or she resided of their ancient homeland of Israel and of the Jewish attachment to its history and holy soil.

Actually, the honey referred to in the land flowing "with milk and honey" is not the common bee honey that we use today, but rather describes the honey of biblical times that was primarily produced from overripe dates. Even today, here in Israel, date honey is produced and sold, though the overwhelming majority of honey on the market comes from bees.

### **Is it Kosher?**

The use of bee honey as a permissible kosher food raises an interesting halachic question. The general rule is that food products that are derived from non-kosher creatures are never considered to be kosher for Jewish use as a food. Bees are a non-kosher species of insect life, and therefore one would think that the honey that they produce within the sacs of their bodies would also not be kosher. Yet we find in the Bible that bee honey was eaten without compunction -- the story in the book of Judges of Samson and the bees producing honey on the lion's carcass being only one such example.

Why is honey different from, say, milk from a camel that remains non-kosher, since the camel itself which gave the milk is a non-kosher animal?

The rabbis of the Talmud studied the problem and decided that the sac in the bee that contains the honey is halachically considered to be only a storage place of the honey, and neither it or the honey produced are an

integral part of the bee's body. By contrast, the milk-producing organs and the lactating process of the camel are an integral part of the camel's circulatory and digestive system, and thus the camel and its milk product both have the same status of being non-kosher.

The same logic applies to permitting the use of resinous glaze in kosher products today, even though the product originally comes from the body of the insect lac which is found on the trees of rain forests. There too, the sac that contains the glaze and the glaze itself are not considered to be an integral part of the body of the insect itself.

Its symbolism of sweetness in life, its connection to the Land of Israel, its role in halachic discussion, decision and precedent concerning its kashrut, all have combined to make honey a "Jewish" food. The use of honey as a food is certainly one of the more enjoyable customs of Jewish tradition. May its symbolism of sweetness truly be a harbinger of delight for the good year for us all.



# Understanding the High Holidays

by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman 5 min read

***The overarching theme of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is "change:" to change from what we were before and to become new individuals.***

Tishrei, the month of Rosh Hashana, is the first month of the universe, and just as when G-d completed His Creation He contemplated and evaluated it, so does He do every Rosh Hashana -- which means that Rosh Hashana is actually the Day of Judgment for the universe and for mankind collectively and individually.

That explains why, more than any other Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashana's liturgy is not limited to Jewish themes exclusively, but contains so many universal themes as well. On no other occasion, for example, is G-d referred to as "King over all the earth," and at no other time is G-d's Holy Temple called a "house of prayer for all the nations." This is all a reflection of the universal judgment of this day.

G-d evaluates us collectively, just as a shepherd looks over his flock with one glance. And individually, He also judges us like a shepherd who looks at each single sheep as it files through a narrow opening in the gate. So Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are more than just a Jewish version of New Year's Day. It's a time of great introspection, of teshuva/repentance, of stock-taking. According to an ancient Jewish tradition, it marks the creation of Adam and Eve -- who were created, who sinned, and who were judged all on the same day.

All of these traditions underscore the idea that Rosh Hashana is the time of beginnings. For example, the Talmud states that a number of other events took place on Rosh Hashana: Abraham and Jacob were born on Rosh Hashana; the three barren women -- Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah (the mother of the prophet Samuel) -- were all remembered by G-d on Rosh Hashana, when He decreed that they will give birth. On Rosh Hashana, Joseph was freed from the Egyptian prison and became viceroy of Egypt. And on Rosh Hashana, slavery ended for the Jews in Egypt and they waited for the ten plagues to be completed so that they could go out to freedom.

Thus, Rosh Hashana is a time for significant initiatives. As such, it is an opportunity for us to recreate ourselves, to return to a relationship with G-d, to strengthen our ties to our faith...

On the one hand, Rosh Hashana is an extremely solemn day, the most solemn of the year after Yom Kippur. Because Rosh Hashana begins the Ten Days of Repentance, we stand at the bar of judgment on those days. It's as if we were in a courtroom pleading for our very lives.

Our tradition gives us a vivid image: "The Books of the Living and the Books of the Dead are open before Him," which means many things -- but one of the things it means is that we pray that our names be inscribed by our loving and understanding G-d in the one book and not in the other.

Our tradition also tells us that beginning with Rosh Hashana, a Jew has the opportunity to return to G-d, to perform teshuva -- which literally means to turn around, to return, to start all over again. Rosh Hashana and its companion, Yom Kippur, are Divine gifts in which we are given the opportunity to reopen our relationship with G-d, when we have the chance to wipe away the past as if it did not exist, and to start over again with a clean slate.

The slate is not wiped clean automatically. The process has to begin with us, with a sense of true regret, with contrition for past misdeeds, and with a serious resolution not to repeat them. The opportunity is given to sincere returners, not to pro forma ones who are just going through the motions. But once the process is properly done, once the catharsis of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur make their impact on us, what could be more joyous than that? So, yes, it is solemnity filled with awe, and also filled with spiritual joy.

Remember that in the religious context joy is deeply inward, and is not necessarily manifested by laughter and smiles. As such, religious joy and religious awe are not contradictions. In fact, they go hand in hand. In the second Psalm, King David says, "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling."

The liturgy of Rosh Hashana, especially the additional "musaf" service, is the most magnificent prayer the world has ever seen. It's like a symphony, perfectly balanced, divided into three separate movements, devoted to the themes of:

- a. making G-d our sovereign and acknowledging Him as our King;
- b. remembering His intervention in our history, and underscoring our belief in Divine Providence -- the idea that He listens and cares for us; and
- c. recalling the numerous Biblical events where the shofar heralds G-d's presence and protection, and longing for the time when the shofar will herald the redemption of all mankind and the coming of the Messiah...

Bear this in mind: the overarching theme of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is "change:" to change from what we were before and to become new individuals. The motif behind it all is accountability. We are responsible for our actions. We do not live in a vacuum. What we do or say has an impact and a resonance in the world. Yom Kippur represents the potential for a human being to change and return: we are not eternally condemned to follow a certain habitual path; we do have the ability, if we so choose, to change our ways.

It is amazing: in the Talmud ([Nedarim 39b](#)), the Sages tell us that teshuva, repentance, was created before the world was created. That is to say, the idea of repentance, of a person changing himself and changing his course, is an integral part of Creation -- and the world could not exist without it.

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# Rosh Hashanah's 4-Step Game Plan

by Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith 5 min read

***The goal of Rosh Hashanah is to reveal G-d's presence in the world.***

***How do you do that?***

For some Jews, the [Rosh Hashanah](#) liturgy can be a shock to the system. The primary theme is coronating G-d as King, and the prayers delve into describing a utopia where G-d's presence is manifest and all is right the world.

It's pretty cerebral stuff. What does it mean to [make G-d King](#)? What am I supposed to do with that?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a great 20 century ethicist who wrote numerous books on Jewish philosophy and personal development, gave a very down-to-earth recipe that resonated with me. He defined the goal of Rosh Hashanah as committing to revealing G-d's presence in the world through our actions.

How do you do that?

Rabbi Wolbe derives four primary avenues on which to focus, based on the Talmud (Sotah, Chapter 7) that teaches there are four groups of people who drive G-d out of the world: cynics, liars, flatterers and those who constantly speak *lashon hara*, derogatory speech. He infers from here that the four opposites are ways to bring to G-d into the world.

Let's define these four and their opposite, and how they apply to Rosh Hashanah.

## **1. Cynics:**

A cynic actively thwarts connection to meaning. He erects a barrier that prevents any inspiration from penetrating his heart.

The opposite is one who yearns for meaning, growth and connection. The Talmud teaches, "One who comes to purify himself, they assist him" ([Yoma, 38b](#)) – "they" being G-d's spiritual messengers. The first step is to fan your inner ember that desires growth. **Even if you're still submerged in counter-productive behavior, G-d guarantees that your sincere longing to do better will open the door for spiritual advancement.** Connect to the part of you that truly wants to change, make a sincere commitment – even if it's for just one small step, and G-d will expand that tiny foothold and help you.

## **2. Liars:**

Once you have reconnected to your internal desire to grow, the next step is clarifying your destination. The goal is to reach for truth.

A liar spreads falsehood and has no interest in the truth. In Hebrew, the word for a lie is "*sheker*". This three-letter Hebrew word -- שקר -- is comprised of letters that all stand on one foot, so to speak. Lies cannot last; they are intrinsically unstable and are destined to fall, revealed to be what they really are – empty delusions. Contrast this to the Hebrew word for truth -- *emet*, אמת -- whose three letters all stand firm and strong on two legs. Truth lasts.

The word *emet* has another unique facet: it's comprised of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the middle letter, and the last. Truth encompasses the whole picture. It requires the humility to recognize that you don't know everything, that you're missing pieces of the puzzle, and that throughout your life you need to be a constant truth seeker, amassing more and more pieces of the puzzle.

Falsehood brings darkness to the world. A commitment to lead a life based on truth, no matter how difficult it may be, is crucial as an overarching guide to living.

### **3. Flatterers:**

A flatterer is driven by his constant need for acceptance and attention. He is enslaved to people's validation and approval. This need for acceptance is a black hole that sucks one's life force, disconnecting him from his spiritual essence and leaving him feeling empty inside.

The opposite is freedom and independence; it is the courage to do the right thing, regardless what people may think. That confidence stems from genuine self-esteem, rooted in the recognition of one's internal intrinsic worth as a G-dly soul.

This independence enables you break free from the false expectations and limitations your society shackles you with, and to instead focus on fulfilling your unique mission in life.

So the first step is yearning for growth, the second is committing to truth, and the third is having the courage to live that truth.

### **4. Gossipmongers:**

Everyone is a mixture of positive and negative traits. Someone who constantly focuses on the negative in others and tears people down masks a person's inner G-dliness. Instead of bringing the light of truth into the world, this insecure, small-minded person spreads darkness.

The opposite is actively seeking the good *in* others – and doing good *for* others, engaging in in acts of kindness. He sees the G-dliness in others, and [through giving becomes more like G-d.](#)

G-d is infinite and has no needs, epitomizes the trait of giving. The most concrete way you can reveal G-d in the world is by revealing sparks on G-dliness in others, and emulating G-d through acts of kindness.

In making mankind His partner in creation, each of us has the power through our actions to live a life built on truth and reveal some of G-d's light in the world.

Shana tova, may you be blessed with a sweet new year filled with everything good.

# Three Meditations When Hearing the Shofar

by Slovie Jungreis-Wolff 4 min read

## ***What should you be thinking about as the shofar pierces the air?***

With the right mindset, you can soar above your physical space and allow your heart to take you anywhere.

When the blast of the [shofar](#) fills the air, close your eyes and contemplate. Here are three meditations to think about while hearing the shofar.

### **1. Let go of your ego**

Focus on the shape of the shofar. It's curved and bent. It's time to stop fixating on everyone else's faults, disparaging their mistakes, making them feel smaller as you make yourself feel bigger.

Begin with this meditation: I will work on growing my patience, opening my heart to those who think differently, look differently, or who seem to have nothing in common with me. I will let go of my egotism, my self-absorbed life, my attitude of arrogance. A new year brings new opportunity to recreate myself. Perhaps there have been times that I've been entrenched in my way of thinking, when I have hurt others through being judgmental and condescending.

Today I start fresh. I know that my compassion can fill the world with goodness. Just a little bit of light can push away the darkness. I will make space for others. I will recognize that my success is a blessing and my failure an opportunity to rise above. It is not about me. Instead it is about what I can do to make this universe better because I exist.

### **2. I have life to give**

When Adam, the first man was created, G-d blew His breath of life within him. This breath of life is called a soul. In Hebrew, the word for soul (*neshama*) shares the same root for the word "breath" (*neshima*). You blow the shofar, taking that G-d-given breath, and you now blow back. Listen to the sound you create! This is your life force, your potential to generate your unique music in this world.

Every person is an exclusive instrument, able to bring another distinct melody to life. When you discover your individual mission, you bring your singular music alive. Together, all of our singular sounds create the most beautiful harmony.

When you hear the sounds of the shofar, breathe in. Concentrate on your every breath and breathe out. This is your sacred breath, the part of you that has potential to live a life filled with soul. You pray for life. But not just any life filled with empty days of sleepwalking, devoid of meaning and purpose. You seek real life that connects to your inner soul's music that is waiting to be released. You have so much life to give.

### **3. Heal my broken heart**

The sounds of the [shofar reflect the story of our lives](#). It begins with *tekiah* – a complete sound. You enter this world gentle and whole, with hopes and dreams. The world is waiting for you.

Then there is the sound called *shevarim* that consists of three short blasts. In Hebrew *shevarim* means brokenness. At times in life you may find yourself broken. Life happens, your heart is shattered. Dreams and visions are crushed.

The *teruah* sound comes next; nine sharp staccato blasts. Close your eyes. These are the sounds of your sharp sobs and cries. You have no words to describe your pain. The hurt is so deep. How will you get out of this void that has sucked the joy out of life?

And we conclude with *tekiah gedolah* – one long complete blast. This is the instant that you find healing. Remember, there is nothing as whole as a broken heart. When you allow yourself to grow vulnerable, to yearn for a spiritual connection, to envelope yourself with the power of Rosh Hashanah, you journey from restriction to expansiveness. From brokenness to wholeness. From darkness to light. The piercing sounds of the shofar restores your weary self.

This [Rosh Hashanah](#), take a moment as you hear the sounds of the shofar. See its shape. Hear its sound. Close your eyes and focus your mind. Meditate on your purpose and mission. Seek healing. Reflect upon your life.

Wishing you a year filled with peace, joy, and blessing.

# Perfectly Imperfect: The Secret of the Shofar

by Rabbi Binyomin Weisz 6 min read

## ***The path to true acceptance is unlocked by the shofar.***

Our humble shofar, barely capable of modulating its tone, makes a surprisingly powerful impact. It serves as a bugle-call inspiring us to repentance. At the same time it joyfully trumpets the coronation of our King on Rosh Hashanah. In many places throughout the Torah and our prayers the shofar is linked to liberation and redemption. And the Sages teach – enigmatically – that through the mitzvah of sounding it on Rosh Hashanah we are inscribed for a good judgment.

What is the secret behind the shofar that unites all these themes?

The Code of Jewish Law teaches that a shofar which develops a hole or a flaw remains fully kosher, even if the hole alters its sound. Because all sounds are valid for a shofar. (See O.C. 586:6-7 and *M.B. ad loc.*)

I found this fascinating. Somehow, I sensed there was a valuable message here.

Jewish sources (in particular Rav Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin) teach that this simple blast resonates in the recesses of a Jewish heart. Its sound touches a chord and something profound starts to awaken within. Because the shofar reflects our deepest call of all: the wordless cry of the Jewish soul that longs to rise above limitation and return to closeness with its Divine source, its closeness to G-d.

However, when approaching the High Holy days – and even when standing before the King of Kings on Rosh Hashanah – we sometimes struggle to feel this in our prayers, similar to a shofar that refuses, at times, to emit a decent sound.

We yearn to express our deepest spiritual self but our hearts are sometimes unwilling to open and feel. Distractions from our surroundings or from our lives can dominate our thoughts. We say words we know could be filled with meaning; we see others who seem to have found passionate prayer. And sometimes we question the value of our own prayer, unsure of how G-d receives words which seem so flat and uninspired.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yes, the air might not be flowing smoothly through my shofar. There may be a hole, a lack. My spiritual connection might not be flowing easily into my heart.

But the truth is: **"All sounds are kosher" – not only for the shofar, but for the heart as well.**

Because G-d wants me to speak genuinely. To have an intimate conversation with Him. True, He is an awe-inspiring, unfathomable King. But as King He is also infinitely loving and merciful. And He just so happens to be my Father too...

He wants me to connect and come close. And He wants to hear the authentic words that flow from my heart – wherever it happens to be today.

He welcomes the sound that comes from even an 'imperfect' heart.

According to the text of the Rosh Hashanah prayer, G-d "*hears the sound of the shofar-blast of His people Israel with compassion*".

I believe this means: He hears deeper. He senses the muffled but real desire behind our most humble of calls. He knows the intentions hidden within our words.

He listens with the love and understanding of One who knows our essence, Who gives us the constant gift of life and is guiding us to our destiny. Who truly knows our challenges, our triumphs, our falls.

He knows what we truly want, even when the words do not come easily to us, even when we struggle to focus or feel. He knows we want to connect and to come home.

Yes, G-d cherishes my every word. He accepts me and loves me as I am today – even though He understands I have a long growth-journey lying ahead.

So I draw courage and stand face-to-face with my limitations, without shrinking or running. I allow for honest remorse. Here is my place of Now.

I accept my emotional and spiritual state and I choose to make the most powerful statement a Jew can make: *G-d, I am Yours!* I accept Your Will. Whatever I feel, wherever I am. I crown You as my King in every situation.

Of course, acceptance does not mean becoming complacent. I still need to honestly evaluate my life and reflect on how I want to act differently this coming year. It also doesn't preclude trying my best.

But at this very moment my state of 'now' is my truth. This is the reality with which You, G-d, are presenting me right now.

So I do not fight it, nor do I let my inner critic deflate me or rob me of my faith. I accept this imperfect reality. I will serve You *from this place*.

Because that's exactly what He wants. "G-d is close... to all those who call Him with *truth!*" ([Psalms 145](#)).

The shofar indeed sounds the grandest of royal fanfares. It speaks our most profound acceptance of – and surrender to – His Kingship.

We can now sense a new message in the continuation of the Jewish law we quoted above:

"If one sealed the hole in the shofar with foreign (i.e. non-shofar) material it becomes *pasul* – invalid, even if the repair restores its original sound."

If we try to force emotion, artificially pushing to achieve that 'perfect' prayer, we are actually making our prayer less desirable to G-d. Because He doesn't want the perfect prayer or the perfect feeling. He wants my authentic service, perfectly imperfect. Yes, He wants me.

Could this be the secret of our precious shofar?

As we take a breath and blow, unknowing of quite what sound will emerge, we reveal our simple desire to come close and receive G-d's will, in every situation. We act on the belief that our voice is always heard. That our voice is real, however it sounds externally. We declare our allegiance to truth and to essence.

In this way the [shofar blast](#) weaves into one all those threads of meaning. It is our honest coronation of G-d in our lives. Simultaneously, it is our call of repentance, of coming home. And it sounds redemption: it frees our spirit to express its song, casting off the silence born of self-doubt and limitation.

It is no wonder that the [shofar](#) brings a flow of Divine compassion on our nation, along with an inscription for a good and sweet year.

I wish us all a [Rosh Hashanah](#) of honest acceptance, and a powerful, true returning to G-d's embrace.



# G-d's Alarm Clock

by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks 4 min read

## **Maximizing our greatest gift – time.**

There are many lovely explanations for why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana, but one of the most powerful is given by Moses Maimonides. For Maimonides the shofar is G-d's alarm clock, waking us up from the "slumber" in which we spend many of our days. What did he mean?

G-d's greatest gift to us is time, and He gives it to us on equal terms. Whether we are rich or poor, there are still only 24 hours in a day, seven days in a week and a span of years that is all too short. Often we spend our time on things that in Maimonides' words "neither help nor save." How many people looking back on a lifetime, saying, "I wish I had spent more time at committee meetings?" By contrast, how many say, "I wish I had spent more time with my children, or helping others, or simply enjoying being alive?"

**Sometimes we can be so busy making a living that we hardly have time to live.** Experts on time management speak about two types of activity: the urgent and the important. Often our days are spent on the urgent, and we lose out on the important. I remember a conversation with someone who had been a workaholic, busy seven days a week. As a result of a personal crisis he decided to keep Shabbat. He later told me it was the best decision he ever made. "Now," he said, "I have time for my wife and child and for my friends. Going to shul has made me part of a community. The strange thing is that the work still gets done, in six days, not seven."

Shabbat teaches us to take time for what is important, even though it isn't urgent. Thirty years ago, when technology was less advanced, most people who wrote about the future saw it as an age of leisure when we would have far more free time. It has not happened that way. We seem more pressurized than ever and less relaxed. Mobile phones, e-mails and pocket computers mean that we are constantly on call. As Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us; late and soon / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." The Psalmist put it best: "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are when we number our days. Asking to be written in the book of life, we think about life and how we use it. In this context the three key words of the "*Unetaneh Tokef*" prayer are fundamental: *teshuvah* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity). *Teshuvah* is about our relationship with ourself. *Tefillah* is about our relationship with G-d. *Tzedakah* is about our relationship with other people.

*Teshuvah* means not only "repentance" but also "returning" -- to our roots, our faith, our people's history and our vocation as heirs to those who stood at Sinai more than 3,000 years ago. *Teshuvah* asks us: did we grow in the past year or did we stand still? Did we study the texts of our heritage? Did we keep one more mitzvah? Did we live fully and confidently as Jews? *Teshuvah* is our satellite navigation system giving us a direction in life.

*Tefillah* means prayer. It is our conversation with G-d. We speak, but if we are wise we also listen, to the voice of G-d as refracted through the prayers of a hundred generations of our ancestors. *Tefillah* is less about asking G-d for what we want, more about asking G-d to teach us what to want. A new car? A better job? An exotic holiday? Our prayers do not speak about these things because life is about more than these things. It is less about what we own than about what we do and who we aspire to be. We speak about forgiveness and about G-d's presence in our lives. We remind ourselves that, short though our time on earth is, by connecting with G-d we touch eternity. *Tefillah* is our 'mobile phone to heaven.'

*Tzedakah* is about the good we do for others. Sir Moses Montefiore was one of the great figures of Victorian Jewry. He was a wealthy man and devoted much of his long life to serving the Jewish people in Britain and worldwide (he built the windmill in Jerusalem, and the area of which it is a part -- Yemin Moshe -- is named after him). Someone once asked him how much he was worth, and he gave him a figure. "But," said the

questioner, "I know you own more than that." "You didn't ask me what I own but what I am worth. The figure I gave you was how much money I have given this year to charity, because we are worth what we are willing to share with others." That is *tzedakah*.

Certain mitzvot in Judaism are rehearsals for a time to come. Shabbat is a rehearsal for the messianic age when strife will end and peace reign. Yom Kippur -- when we do not eat or drink or engage in physical pleasure, and when there is a custom to wear a *kittel* like a shroud -- is a dress rehearsal for death. It forces us to ask the ultimate question: what did I do in my life that was worthwhile? Did I waste time or did I share it, with my faith, with G-d, and with those in need?

Knowing that none of us will live for ever, we ask G-d for another year: to grow, to pray and to give. That is what Maimonides meant when he called the shofar "G-d's alarm call," asking us not to slumber through life, but to use it to bring blessings.

May the Almighty bless us, our families and the Jewish people, and may He write us all in the Book of Life.

# Yom Kippur and the Secret to a Happy Life

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech 7 min read

## ***The connection between envy and the holiest day of the year.***

Do you want to know the secret for having a happy life?

Strangely enough, we can derive the answer from Yom Kippur, the day that seems to be dedicated to depriving ourselves of pleasure. But to really understand it we have to grasp the deeper purpose of this last of the 10 days of repentance.

It's no coincidence that the number of days set aside by Jewish tradition for introspection and self improvement correspond exactly to the number of commandments G-d carved on the tablets of law He gave us on Mount Sinai, the greatest summary of our prescription for righteous living.

The 10 days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur present us with an opportunity to set aside one day for each one of the categories alluded to in the Decalogue.

We begin our spiritual journey on the first two days of Rosh Hashanah by stressing our commitment to the first two commandments. We emphasize our dedication to the existence of G-d as well as to his oneness – “I am the Lord your G-d” and “you shall have no other G-ds before me” - as we blow the shofar and acknowledge his Divine rulership and judgment.

With every passing day we follow the progression of the 10 Commandments to ever greater levels of difficulty. The sequence of the Decalogue, the rabbinic sages explain, is rooted in the divine assumption that every step we take in a spiritual program of self perfection allows us then to move forward to even greater heights. Just as physical training proceeds by way of learning to master ever more strenuous and difficult tasks, so too does our moral code move forward with greater and more demanding challenges.

The 10<sup>th</sup> and last commandment – “Thou shalt not covet” – the one that requires of us to control not only our actions and words but even our thoughts, is clearly the most daunting and the most difficult one of all. Yet, in its concern for the elimination of envy and its attempt to convince us of the folly of spending our lives seeking to accumulate more and more of the things others possess, it is almost certainly the most relevant of the Commandments for contemporary times.

“Thou shalt not covet” corresponds with Yom Kippur, the 10<sup>th</sup> and last day of repentance. it deserves to be the focus of our attention on Yom Kippur because only by mastering its message can we hope to achieve self-fulfillment and happiness.

What is it, after all, that makes so many people feel like failures? On a superficial level the simple assumption is that we are depressed because we are deprived. The truth is that it is not so. Our obsession for acquiring wealth has far less to do with our personal wants than with our refusal to have less than others. We have to face up to the fact that, as Frank Ross put it, “It is not so much what we haven't, but what others have that makes for unhappiness.”

A fascinating psychological study proves the point. The following question was posed to a representative sampling of people: Would you rather earn 100,000 dollars when everyone around you is making \$50,000 or would you rather make \$200,000 when everyone around you makes \$400,000? The study made clear that the question assumed that the cost of living and goods stays the same. A rational person would choose the second option, where he makes more money but less than people around him. That way he will have twice as much to spend. In reality most people picked the first option. The most important consideration was simply being richer than other people!

That's why there is a multibillion-dollar industry in the world today whose purpose is the systematic propagation of envy, the acceptance of the new tenth commandment, which now reads, "You shall covet." The name of the industry is advertising. Its goal, as frankly admitted by advertising guru B. Earl Puckett, is this: "It is our job to make men and women unhappy with what they have."

Every few months, fashions change. What is "in" one month is "out" the next. One week you're an outcast if you're not wearing a certain kind of sneakers. The next week, you're out of date and a geek if you haven't switched to another brand. Why must you constantly have something else? Because big business needs consumers. So consumers have to be taught what they need rather than to have their real needs met.

There's no big secret which emotion Madison Avenue wants to appeal to most. Gucci was brave enough to admit it when it called a new perfume it was trying to popularize, "Envy." Remarkable, isn't it, that what the Torah has identified as the basic cause of human suffering – the sin of envy – has become the very feeling the age of advertising wants us to strongly embrace.

How many times a day are we told not to be happy with what we have because others have more? Thomas Clapp Patton, in his book *Envy Politics*, gives us the staggering figure that Americans are exposed to about 3,000 ads a day. Big-city newspapers consist of 70 to 90 percent ads rather than news. The subliminal message is always the same: Whether you really need it or not, don't be without what other people have.

If the desire for something is based on need, then fulfillment brings contentment. If the goal, however, is to overcome the need to covet the acquisitions of others, then we are doomed to disappointment and to ever-greater dissatisfaction. There's always somebody who has a little bit more – enough at least to stir up within us sufficient envy to prevent us from being content with what is ours.

A study published this past June in *Psychological Science* confirmed what we should have intuitively recognized. "The things we are trained to think make us happy, like having a new car every couple of years and buying the latest fashions, don't make us happy. Buying luxury goods, conversely, tends to be an endless cycle of one-upsmanship, in which the neighbors have a fancy new car and – bingo! – now you want one, too."

So what really gives us true happiness? Faith in a higher power is high up on the list. Optimism based on belief in G-d is worth more than \$1 million in the bank. A feeling of self-worth rooted in a commitment to a life lived with values provides far more satisfaction than unlimited amounts of stuff and more stuff to fill our closets.

The bottom line? The spiritual rewards reaped from a religious perspective far outweigh the benefits seductively paraded before us in the advertisements that daily bombard us with their false and alluring promises.

That is why we so desperately need Yom Kippur to help us rearrange our priorities. It is a day when we demonstrate that we can master our physical needs. We choose prayer over food. We choose communion with G-d over making more money. We do not wear our jewelry and our adornments so that no one need envy the possessions of others. We concentrate not on the things we covet that don't belong to us but on the blessings G-d has already granted to us that could give us so much joy if we only fully appreciated them.

And that's why, ironically enough, the day of Yom Kippur, with all of its deprivations, helps to teach us the real meaning of happiness and contentment.

# Yom Kippur: The Blessing of Failure

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech 6 min read

## **Recognizing our shortcomings is the only way to achieve success in life.**

“What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?”

That was the tantalizing title of the lead story in the New York Times Sunday magazine a few weeks ago. The article makes us rethink an attitude that has become culturally accepted as unquestioned truth, and more profoundly, its conclusions encourage us to acknowledge the wisdom of Jewish tradition and the insights it asks us to emphasize in our observance of Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is a day dedicated to acknowledging our failings.

[Related Video: Yom Kippur: Everyone Falls](#)

Over and over again we repeat the words, "I have sinned." We recognize that in many ways we "missed the mark," the literal translation of the Hebrew word for sin. We admit we weren't perfect. If we were to be graded by G-d for our actions during the past year, we confess that in some areas we deserve an F.

And yet whoever heard of a mark like that in our contemporary culture?

For decades now parents have been told by many ostensible experts that all they are permitted to do in rearing children is to praise them. Criticism is always destructive of self-esteem, and self-esteem is the highest value we must pass on to our progeny. Make them feel good about themselves; that way they will feel happy and self contented. Don't ever burden them with the verdict that they have failed to fulfill any objective. Don't ever crush their spirits by telling them they could've done better. Rewards, not criticism or punishments, are what children need to become responsible adults.

The teaching profession, too, was slowly drawn into this philosophy of "praise at all costs" without any reminders of failure. Grade inflation turned everyone into a scholar, because "he tried his best and he might feel bad if he didn't get an excellent mark." Valedictorians were eliminated in many schools because those who didn't earn the honor felt the loss of self-esteem, and it just didn't seem right to acknowledge that some weren't as perfect as others. More liberal schools eliminated competitive sports - or if they had them, rejected keeping score - so that nobody would ever have to admit to being a loser.

But what if the real secret to success is failure?

What if we need to keep score in our own lives and **to acknowledge our errors, our weaknesses, and our failings if we are ever to improve and become what we are capable of becoming?**

The New York Times article is an eye-opener because it forces us to confront what previous generations knew and we chose to forget: Recognizing our shortcomings is the only way to achieve success in life.

Paul Tough, the author of the essay (the appropriateness of his last name is stunningly obvious), concludes his lengthy analysis with this observation:

*Most Riverdale students can see before them a clear path to a certain type of success. They'll go to college, they'll graduate, they'll get well-paying jobs — and if they fall along the way, their families will almost certainly catch them, often well into their 20s or even 30s, if necessary. But despite their many advantages, Randolph [the headmaster of this exclusive and very wealthy school] isn't yet convinced that the education they currently receive at Riverdale, or the support they receive at home, will provide them with the skills to negotiate the path toward the deeper success that Seligman and Peterson hold up*

*as the ultimate product of good character: a happy, meaningful, productive life. Randolph wants his students to succeed, of course — it's just that he believes that in order to do so, they first need to learn how to fail.*

To learn how to fail is nothing less than a succinct five word summary of the Yom Kippur confessional. It requires us to be mature enough to face up to the personal failings which well-meaning parents, teachers and friends tried to shield us from recognizing. It asks us to admit we're not perfect precisely because we're willing to take on the challenge of perfecting ourselves.

On Yom Kippur we have to define ourselves in light of a concept that Benjamin Barber, a political scientist at Rutgers University, believes is an ultimate truth about human behavior. We love to categorize people, usually by labeling them by one of two distinctly different characteristics. People are skinny or fat, introverted or extroverted, optimists or pessimists, serious or funny. All of these lead to stereotyping and to generalizations that aren't completely accurate. But there is one division of people that Barber claims is the most crucial and correct way to differentiate between them. He says:

*I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don't. I divide the world into learners and non-learners - those who acknowledge their failures, learn from them, and move forward as opposed to those who can't admit ever having done anything wrong, never learn from their mistakes, and doom themselves to reliving the errors of their ways.*

That's why on Yom Kippur, when we're asked to reflect upon whether our lives can be considered a success, we're judged by whether we're courageous enough to confess our sins and to admit our failures.

To acknowledge, to G-d and to ourselves, where we've gone wrong in our lives doesn't diminish us. On the contrary, it affords us the wisdom and strength to grow and to improve.

S. I. Hayakawa, former U.S. senator from California and a specialist in semantics, alerted us to an all-important distinction between two English words that most of us assume are identical: "Notice the difference between what happens when a man says to himself, 'I have failed three times,' and what happens when he says, 'I am a failure.'" To think of yourself as a failure is to create a perpetual self-image as a loser. But if you learn from your experience, if your failure inspires you to surpass yourself and to do it better next time, if you understand that failure is merely a momentary event but doesn't define you—then you are an alumnus of the best school in the world, and your failure was the tuition you paid for your eventual success.

On Yom Kippur we evaluate ourselves. On Yom Kippur we are critical of our failings. On Yom Kippur we don't deny our sins - we build on their memory for spiritual growth.

On Yom Kippur we realize the truth that failure - acknowledging it, learning from it, and rising from it - is really the secret of success.

# People Can Change

by Rabbi Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith 7 min read

## ***How to access the transformational power of Yom Kippur.***

Can people change?

After breaking so many resolutions, encountering the same bad habits and mistakes each and every year, it is understandable that deep down many people don't believe they can really change.

Understandable, but wrong. And damaging. That attitude undermines our confidence and sabotages our efforts at *teshuva*, repentance, even before we start.

Referring to the commandment to perform *teshuva*, the Torah says, "For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven for you to say, 'Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it? Nor is it across the sea, for you to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us...' Rather the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it" ([Deut. 30:11-14](#)). At first glance, the reader may think that the Torah is saying that uprooting one's negative trait is easy to do. But we know that is simply not true. Real change is a daunting task. So what is the Torah telling us?

The commentaries explain that the Torah is pointing out a fundamental truth about repentance: there is nothing external that you need in order to change – it is entirely up to you to make that choice to change. You don't need prophets, different parents, better teachers, greater spiritual leaders, different friends... You only need to use your free will. Yes, it is difficult – but with a serious commitment and substantial, ongoing effort, it is eminently doable. (Sorry, there is no magic pill.)

In order to gain confidence that you can in fact change, tap into the [power of your free will](#). We use it far less than we think we do. Feel the empowerment that comes through making the difficult choice to decline that piece of chocolate cake, go for that jog, or start writing that book.

### **The Power of *Teshuva***

*Teshuva*, repentance, comes from the Hebrew word "return;" we are returning to our soul, realigning our actions with our inner self, and getting back on track. In the process we also restore our relationship with G-d. The miracle of *teshuva* is that not only do we start a new page, we go back in the past and edit the old ones. *Teshuva* uproots the misdeed from our past; it's as if it never happened.

How do we tap in to this incredible power of [Yom Kippur](#)?

The key is utilizing the following four-step process that comprise the mitzvah of *teshuva*.

#### **Step 1: Cessation: Immediately stop the harmful action.**

The Talmud says that a person who made a mistake and admits it, but does not renounce doing it again, is compared to going into the mikveh holding a dead reptile in his hand, rendering the immersion useless. He has to throw away the reptile to attain purity. ([Ta'anit 16a](#))

Can you imagine trying to ask forgiveness from someone while you continue to wrong him at the same time? Without stopping the bad action, all the heart-pounding just won't help. You have to stop the transgression. The gig is up.

It can take some work to understand the root of what you did wrong. Don't just look at a list of external actions. Instead examine the list and discern patterns of behavior. Quite often the underlying cause is an issue regarding a character trait (anger, laziness, arrogance) and tackling that root is where to focus your energy.

### **Step 2: Regret**

Feeling sincere regret is the engine of change. Without it, you don't have any compelling reason to stop the negative action. The obvious starting point is recognizing that you indeed did something wrong. We are masters of rationalizing our actions and coming up with excuses for our misdeeds.

Don't fudge it. Realize the extent of the damage of your transgression and stop blaming others for poor decisions. You are solely responsible for your actions.

Regret is different than guilt. Guilt is the negative emotion saying that "I am bad." Regret is the positive acknowledgement that I have failed to live up to my potential and my essence remains pure. My choice, my action was bad.

Regret is empowering. It's a positive sign that we're back in touch with our essence. Our conscience will not let us relax until we've corrected the mistake. Guilt is immobilizing, it depresses us. Instead of focusing outward on uprooting the bad and changing the present, it gets us to focus inward on our ego and wallow in the past.

### **Step 3: Confession (Viduy):**

Jewish law prescribes that we admit our mistake by articulating it verbally. It forms the main part of our prayers on Yom Kippur. Why the need to confess?

By using the human being's power of speech, which is a manifestation of our soul, we concretize our admission of guilt, moving it from the realm of internal thought into the external. Saying it out loud makes it real. We confront the truth to ourselves, and also come face to face with G-d. On a spiritual level, verbalizing our confession has the power to [remove spiritual toxins](#) that gather as a result of our transgressions.

### **Step 4: Resolution Not to Repeat:**

This step is critical. Regret will fade, and the only way to ensure real change is by committing to a down-to-earth strategy that lays out a realistic, long term plan of action. G-d doesn't expect us to be angels. We can't change everything overnight. But we do need to create a concrete plan.

Here are the some essential points that go into making an effective plan that will lead to genuine change over time:

- a. Be totally realistic and grounded. If you bite off more than you can chew you'll be right back where you started.
- b. Pick one small thing you can totally change forever. Our sages say, "Open for Me a hole the size of a needle and I will open it for you the size of a banquet hall." The Almighty is telling us that if we make one small, permanent change – akin to a pinprick, a tiny hole that goes all the way through – then He will expand our small change and bring us exponential assistance from Above.
- c. Your plan should be action oriented, not only dependent on thoughts, and don't just rely on yourself. If you enlist the aid of someone else to help you in a specific area, you are more likely to live up to your commitment.
- d. Yom Kippur is only one day. Your plan for growth should carry you throughout the entire year. That means you need to monitor your progress, at least once a month, by doing a *cheshbon hanefesh*, a [spiritual accounting](#).
- e. Envision the positive benefits you're going to receive by making this change. Make the payoff vivid and real (imaging how you'll look and feel 20 pounds lighter). Use it to motivate you.



### **Step 5: Ask for Forgiveness**

Lastly, if we have wronged others, in addition to the four steps, we need to sincerely [apologize](#) and make amends in order to achieve complete *teshuva*.

I wish all of you Shana Tova and gmar chasima tova.

# Four Myths about Forgiveness

by Debbie Gutfreund 3 min read

***You can forgive even without an apology, even if you're still in pain, and even if you'll never reconcile with the person who hurt you.***

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur present an opportunity to align more closely with your priorities and values, and to examine your relationships. Are there people you need to forgive? Are there mistakes for which you need to ask forgiveness?

There are several myths that can make forgiveness seem insurmountable. Here are four central myths about forgiveness to re-examine and practical tools on how to ask for forgiveness.

## **Myth 1: You need an apology before you can forgive.**

Forgiveness doesn't need to depend on anyone else. It would be nice if everyone who has insulted or hurt you apologized to you immediately, but an apology often comes much later than you expect it. Sometimes it never comes. But you don't need an apology from someone to forgive them.

Forgiveness does not free the other person from blame, but it does free you from resentment. Don't wait for an apology to free yourself. Forgive the person now.

## **Myth 2: Forgiveness means that you no longer feel any pain or hurt.**

Many people believe that they can't forgive if they still feel insulted or betrayed. They think they have to wait until they're no longer in pain before they can forgive. But in some situations, the hurt will always remain and being free of pain is not necessary in order to forgive. You can forgive while you are still hurt. You can forgive despite the hurt, because anger and resentment only add more suffering to an already painful situation.

Forgiveness is an intentional choice to let go of resentment, and you can let go no matter how much you are still hurting.

## **Myth 3: Forgiveness means that you need to reconcile with the person that you are forgiving.**

Sometimes people hurt you in ways that create barriers to continuing a relationship with them. Sometimes you need to set boundaries that are healthy for you that may preclude any connection with people who have caused you pain. You don't need to reconcile with someone before you can forgive them. They don't even need to know that you are forgiving them.

Sometimes forgiveness is a purely internal process in which you let go of your anger so that you can move forward with your life. Forgiveness is like putting down a heavy bag filled with items you no longer need. You will feel lighter. Your life will feel lighter.

## **Myth 4: Forgiving yourself isn't necessary.**

The focus of forgiveness is usually on others, but often the most important person you need to forgive is yourself. You are probably harder on yourself than on anyone else. You would never talk to a friend the way you talk to yourself about your mistakes.

It's crucial to learn from your mistakes, but holding onto regrets from your past can block you from future growth. When you look back on the mistakes that you made this year, figure out what you can learn from them and then forgive yourself. Often, you are doing the best you can with the knowledge and tools that you have at the moment. Let go of the resentment you have for yourself. Sometimes we need to forgive ourselves before we can forgive others.

Yom Kippur is a special time for forgiveness. As you ask G-d for forgiveness and reflect upon your life, use this time to forgive yourself and others as well. Put down the heavy bag. You don't need to carry it anymore.

# Why Bats Sleep Upside Down and The Secret of Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg 7 min read

## ***Why Yom Kippur is one of the happiest days of the year.***

A few years ago, I had the privilege of awarding someone a medallion at an AA meeting, a celebration of a significant milestone of sobriety. I am always inspired from being among people who have the courage to admit their addiction, name their enemy, and confront it on a regular basis.

The recovery program is made up of 12 steps, and the meeting I attended addressed Step 8, which is “to make a list of all persons we had harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all” and Step 9, “to make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

People reflected on the experience of being willing to make amends with people, some whom they hurt and others they were hurt or injured by. Then one person got up and said something I found fascinating. When she arrived at this step in her recovery, she realized one of the people she most needed to make amends with was... herself. The mistakes she had made, the excuses, missed opportunities, damaged relationships, sabotaged success she had caused herself, left her needing to be willing to forgive herself, to make amends with herself.

The next person who spoke disagreed and pointed out making it about ourselves is what got us into trouble to begin with. Amends is about others, it doesn't always have to be about the “I,” and that kind of thinking is misguided and can lead to bad outcomes.

I walked out of the meeting moved by both sides and thinking about this question. Who was right?

### **Fear and Love Contradiction**

The Talmud reconciles two different statements of Reish Lakish. The first: Great is [\*teshuva\*, repentance](#), as the penitent's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions. The second: Great is repentance, as one's intentional sins are counted for him as merits. The Talmud explains the seeming contradiction: When one repents out of love, a higher level of repentance, his sins become like merits, but when one repents out of fear, a lower level, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions ([Yoma 86b](#)).

I understand how the power of *teshuva* can transform my mistakes, indiscretions, poor judgment, and intentional violations into accidental, careless ones. Picture a judge lightening a sentence because of good behavior and still putting criminal charges on the record, but lesser ones. But what does it mean that my intentional mistakes can become actual merits? How can those mistakes be turned into merits, virtues, assets, acting in one's favor?

Surprisingly, the answer can be derived from sleeping bats.

### **Why Do Bats Sleep Upside Down?**

Many people know that bats sleep upside down but few know the reason. While bats can fly, they can't take off. Some birds can take off from a dead stop by simply flapping their wings, but bats can't. Birds' wings are long and feathered and can generate enough thrust to achieve liftoff, but bats' wings, as ScienceFriday [explains](#), are basically large, webbed hands. Once airborne, a bat can use these webbed hands to sustain the flight over long distances and steer seamlessly, but they have a problem: they can't do the necessary flapping to take off.

So what do bats do if they can fly but can't take off? The answer is they don't take off -- they fall down. During the night, they use their claws to climb up a tree. Once they get high enough off the ground, they drop, using gravity to gain momentum and **they use the momentum from falling to take flight.**

Perhaps this is the meaning of Talmud quoted above. Not all types of *teshuva* are equal. If you do *teshuva* because of fear of punishment, you don't want to suffer the consequence, then your fall can be considered accidental.

But if you do *teshuva*, not out of fear, but from love, enthusiasm and excitement – then you are ready to fly and can use the momentum generated from your fall to give you lift, to take off, to discover things and achieve things you previously couldn't.

### **Why Yom Kippur is One of the Happiest Days of the Year**

For many, Yom Kippur is a dreaded day, not only because of the physical pleasures we are denied but because they think it is a day to beat ourselves up, to rack ourselves with guilt, blame, fault, fear and dread.

That couldn't be farther from the truth. The Mishna lists Yom Kippur as one of the two happiest days of the year. **Yom Kippur is not a day to beat ourselves up, to knock ourselves further down.** We are here to confront our mistakes, to think about failures and the times we have fallen, but to use them to give us the momentum, the energy, and the knowledge of how to fly. Your fall turns into your uplift, into flight.

### **Steve Jobs' Failure**

In [Steve Jobs' Commencement Speech to Stanford's Graduating Class of 2005](#), he retold his story of getting fired from the company he created at the age of 30. It was the most devastating setback of his life. He fell and he fell fast. Though it could have destroyed him, Jobs explained to the graduates that getting publicly fired turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to him.

Losing his position and success as the leader of Apple opened him up to express his creativity more freely. He started a company called NeXT, helped launch Pixar, reclaimed his role as CEO of Apple, and the rest is history. Failure opened Steve Jobs up to express himself more freely and forced him to create his way out of his rock bottom into the super-success he enjoyed at Apple. As he explained to the graduates: "It was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it."

### **J.K. Rowling First Hit Rock Bottom**

J.K. Rowling has sold more than 500 million books and is one of the wealthiest women in the world, but in a commencement speech of her own she described that she needed to fall before she was able to fly. She described how at the time of her own graduation from college, her greatest fear was failure—a fear that became reality seven years later as she struggled through single-parenthood, unemployment, and poverty all at the same time.

Failure, she said, revealed her true character: "I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me... I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realized, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so **rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.**"

### **Take Flight**

We make amends with ourselves not by excusing our fall but by transforming it into momentum to give us lift. The world gives us our fill of fear, worry and anxiousness. Let's resolve to change from love and longing, from lift.

We have made mistakes, we have fallen down sometimes in anger or outrage, sometimes in judgment and sometimes in envy. [Yom Kippur](#) is not about beating ourselves up, staying down, feeling sad, somber or guilty.

Consider what went wrong, why it went wrong, and use that knowledge to learn from it, to gain lift, to take flight and to ensure it doesn't happen again. We don't need to sell that many books or build a revolutionary company to achieve success in our lives. All we need is to get up after we have fallen and take flight.

# The Good Gene

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech 6 min read

## ***Attaining at-onement this Yom Kippur.***

All my life I have started my daily prayers with the following inspiring words:

“My G-d, the soul you placed within me is pure. You created it, you formed it, you breathed it into me, and you guard it while it is within me.”

Our tradition assured me that I was basically good. Not a tabula rasa, an empty slate with no particular leaning towards sin or saintliness, as some philosophies would have it. Not with an innate drive for evil rooted in any primeval original sin, as other religions might preach. No, deep down there is an instinctive pull within me to the moral, to the ethical and to the honorable.

Reaffirming it every day has made it easier to cope with the inevitable temptations that come my way. After all, being good can't be terribly difficult if it simply means that I'm letting myself be the “real” me.

Incredibly, a recent study has scientifically validated this religious conviction. I can't imagine why it hasn't received far more publicity. To my mind it may be one of the most theologically significant insights into human behavior. And if properly understood and taken to heart, it has the power to move mankind in ways never before imagined.

The source is a study published last month in the proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Coming from the world of science, it doesn't deal with souls. That isn't something anyone has as yet learned to identify or calibrate. Instead, its subject is genes.

As summarized in an article in *The New York Times* with the intriguing title, *They Know When You've Been Good or Bad*:

“Our genes may have a more elevated moral sense than our minds do... They can, it seems, reward us with healthy gene activity when we're unselfish – and chastise us, at a microscopic level, when we put our own needs and desires first.”

To speak of genes having a moral sense seems almost preposterous. But here's what researchers from the University of North Carolina and the University of California did. They first had a “goodly” number of volunteers fill out a questionnaire asking them if they felt satisfied with their lives, whether they considered themselves happy, and, if so, to identify the cause of their greatest joy. They followed this up not with more questions, but by looking at the underlying cellular mechanisms that affect mood and health or, more specifically, the gene-expression profiles for the volunteers' white blood cells.

Genes direct the production of proteins which jump-start other processes that control much of the body's immune response. And here was the shocker: **Different forms of happiness were associated with very different gene expression profiles.**

We tend to use the word happiness indiscriminately, without any reference to what kind of pleasure we're experiencing or the reason for our delight. It didn't take too long however for the researchers to recognize a distinct difference physiologically between two kinds of joy.

One is what we would call hedonistic. It's the result of eating a great meal, enjoying a fine scotch, or experiencing physical intimacy. It's the body's reaction to self gratification.

But there is a wholly different category of happiness for which we have the term eudaemonic. It is rooted not in getting but in giving. It is the happiness that comes from the sense of fulfillment that accompanies living a life of higher purpose and service to others. Even as it makes demands on the body and often times stands in the way of physical enjoyment, it succeeds on a higher level. It is the joy felt by a surgeon physically drained after a grueling but successful 12-hour operation. It is the joy felt by the rescuer of a drowning child, weary to the point of exhaustion by his efforts but overwhelmed by the knowledge that he was instrumental in saving a life. It is the joy felt by someone who has made a significant financial contribution, even more than his personal finances would allow, to a cause that epitomizes his highest values.

The researchers determined which of the volunteers were happy as a result of hedonistic or eudaemonic reasons. To their amazement, those whose happiness was primarily based on consuming things and physical gratification “had surprisingly unhealthy profiles, with relatively high levels of biological markers known to promote increased inflammation throughout the body. Such inflammation has been linked to the development of cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. They also had relatively low levels of other markers that increase antibody production, to better fight off infections.”

And those whose happiness stemmed from acts of kindness, communal service, or commitment to a higher cause? They had profiles “that displayed augmented levels of anti-body- producing gene expression and lower levels of the pro-inflammatory expression.”

Stephen W. Cole, a professor of medicine at UCLA and senior author of the study, concluded to his own astonishment that **“our genes can tell the difference” between a purpose-driven life and a life limited solely to the goal of self-indulgence**, and goes so far as to reward the former and biologically express its disapproval for the latter.

Allow me to put it in more spiritual terms. G-d created us in his image. G-d created us for a purpose. We weren't placed on earth merely to be parasites. We have responsibility to others. We are implanted with an ethical and a moral code. And our genes know whether we are being true to our core identity that is rooted in sanctity.

As we approach the awesome day of [Yom Kippur](#) we can find new meaning in the name by which it has become contemporarily known in English, the Day of [Atonement](#).

The word atonement can be divided into two. Yom Kippur is the day of At-Onement – the day in which we become one with G-d.

But now that we know the remarkable truth that our genes are motivated by a moral imperative we can go a step further. It is the day of At-Onement not only because we become one with G-d. By heeding the still small voice of the pure soul that G-d has implanted within us, we achieve the greatest blessing of all-At-Onement with the deepest recesses of ourselves and the spark of G-dliness within us.



# High Intensity Interval Spiritual Training

by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg 4 min read

## ***Orange theory and pushing yourself to grow this time of the year.***

In 2010, Ellen Latham, co-founded an exercise studio in Ft. Lauderdale called Orangetheory. What began as one small business in 2010 is now a movement with 1,200 studios in 22 countries, over 800,000 members and over \$1 billion in sales. An article I recently read explains the philosophy and science behind this popular trend.

Unlike most other exercise classes, the workout is not the same for everyone in the class and the participants are not competing against anyone but themselves. Each member wears a heart monitor to capture how hard their body is working and does a workout based on several factors including age and other variables.

The founders of the company place an emphasis on creating a sense of community. Their goal is to have members feel part of a group that push one another, celebrate each other's victories and support one another in their struggles.

They also designed the franchise to have consistency: members can attend any of the locations in any country and have an expectation of what the Orangetheory will look, what will happen in the class, and every part of the workout experience.

What Orangetheory is to physical workouts, Jewish communal life is meant to be for exercising our souls. We too are encouraged not to measure ourselves, the breadth of our learning, the capacity of our giving, against anyone else. Our mission is to be driven to realize our best selves, to push ourselves to realize *our* fullest potential, and not anyone else's.

Central to Jewish life is fostering a sense of community. We are best positioned for success in working out our souls when we plug into community and find encouragement, support and structure. Our studios for the soul also provide a sense of consistency: we can walk tinoa ny shul in the country with an expectation, more or less, of what we will find in davening, at a Torah class, etc.

But it was something another feature of Orangetheory that caught my eye and that I think we can learn from in growing our studios for the soul. Orangetheory's success is largely due to the format of their classes. The training is designed as HIIT workouts, an acronym for High Intensity Interval Training. In a typical HIIT workout, participants repeat short spurts of high-intensity exercise, intermingled within longer stretches of lower intensity activity designed for active recovery. Within a 60-minute workout, the goal is to keep the heart rate raised to the "orange" level for only about 12 minutes.

There is fascinating wisdom behind the benefits of a HIIT workout including the fact that the high intensity stimulates the body to continue to burn calories, even when in recovery mode. But what struck me was not the science, rather the psychology behind it. Essentially, if you tell someone to begin a challenging workout that will keep their heart rate level high throughout and maintain the level of difficulty, many or most will not even start. However, if you know that recovery is built in and that you will only be pushed to your max for short spurts, you are much more likely to not only begin the workout, but to complete it and gain the benefits.

Our Jewish calendar is designed in some ways as a HIIT workout. We are challenged to push ourselves in spurts spiritually, tap into different themes or energies based on holidays, and take the experience back into the "recovery" period where it continues to enrich us.

Elul is the ultimate intense interval in a HIIT spiritual workout. It is not disingenuous or inauthentic to push ourselves for a short spurt even if we know that the intensity will not necessarily last. Jewish law ([Shulchan Aruch O.C. 603](#)) records a practice that even those who aren't strict to only eat bread products baked by a Jew

the entire year should be strict during the ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. Why? Who are we fooling being on our best behavior for ten days knowing we will revert back as soon as Yom Kippur is over?

The answer is that we are not trying to fool anyone. This time of year we are in the height of an intense interval of our spiritual cycle. We will have extended prayers, be encouraged to add more learning, take on positive practices and generally push ourselves a little harder. Knowing the intensity will subside and we will return to a recovery period doesn't make us fake; it makes us motivated.

Rise to the occasion and challenge yourself these next weeks. Push to be better and to do more, knowing the intense interval will soon be replaced with a recovery period in which our souls will still be benefiting from the hard work we will have done.

# Shoes and the Secret of Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Shmuel Reichman 6 min read

## ***Yom Kippur provides the unique opportunity to transcend our physical limitations and embrace our truest sense of self.***

Yom Kippur is one of the most important days on the Jewish calendar; it is also one of the most unique. While we may think of Yom Kippur as a solemn and difficult day, the Jewish sages refer to Yom Kippur as a joyous and spiritually uplifting day. In fact, Yom Kippur is linked to the happiest day of the year - Purim. The name itself, *Yom Kippurim*, literally means "a day like Purim." However, Purim is a time of feasting and joy, and Yom Kippur is a day when we remove ourselves completely from the physical world - we do not eat or drink, engage in marital relations, wash ourselves, or wear leather shoes. These behaviors are often associated with mourning and sadness, the exact opposite of the joy we experience on Purim. If Yom Kippur is indeed meant to be a joyous holiday as well, how do we reconcile this with the restrictions of the day?

### **Soul Questions: What Are We?**

Most people believe that they "have" a soul, some spiritual essence within themselves. However, Jewish sources teach that you don't *have* a soul, you *are* a soul. The soul is not an aspect of yourself, or some spiritual component of your being; it *is* your very self. You *are* a soul, a consciousness, a spiritual being. When you say "I", you are referring to your soul, your inner sense of self. You *have* a body, emotions, and an intellect, all aspects and expressions of your soul. But at root, you are a soul, a *neshama*, an infinitely expansive consciousness.

A soul is angelic, perfect, pure, and transcendent. However, the moment one enters this physical world, the infinite expansiveness of the soul is confined within the physical body, its container in this world. The body is meant to be the tool of the soul, allowing the soul to fully manifest its will in this world. This is our mission in life. As we journey through life, we tap into greater and greater aspects of our soul, our true self, and we must then manifest them into the world through our physical bodies. In doing so, we uplift our physical vessels and enable them to tap into greater and greater aspects of our true self. Life consists of the endless expansion and expression of self into this physical world.

But it is easy for people to forget that they are a soul, and instead identify with their physical body whose urges and desires are ever-present and enticing. Born in to a physical world, we tend to believe that we are only that which we can see.

**The struggle in life is to see past the material and its craving for immediate gratification, and realize that we are angelic souls in a physical casing longing for deeper meaning and fulfillment.** Yom Kippur is the time to realize that we are at essence spiritual beings trying to uplift our physical experience.

### **The Spiritual Concept of Shoes**

Understanding the meaning behind removing our shoes on Yom Kippur sheds light on the relationship between the soul and the body. The Nefesh Ha'Chaim (1:5, note 6) explains the profound spiritual concept of shoes. The body uses the shoe as a way of traveling through the world. The lowest part of your body resides in your shoe, which allows you to walk. This relationship between your body and shoe is the same exact relationship between you and your body. You are an angelic soul, a *neshama*. Your body is your container, your "shoe", which allows you to interact with the world, move around, and actualize your potential.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for shoe, *na'al*, also means to "lock", because the shoes lock your feet in and allow you to walk around. So too, your body locks your angelic self in, allowing you to control your body and use it to navigate this physical world.

On Yom Kippur, we remove our shoes, which represents transcending our physical bodies. **Taking your "foot" out of your "shoe" represents taking your angelic soul out of your body.** Yom Kippur is the one day of the year when we completely free ourselves of our physical limitations and embrace our angelic selves. The central theme of Yom Kippur is "*teshuva*," repentance. *Teshuva* literally means "return"; on Yom Kippur we return to our ultimate root, our spiritual and perfect soul. The Jewish Sages teach that Yom Kippur is the one day of the year when we have the ability to become angelic. On this day, our lower selves and our physical urges are powerless, they cannot bring us down. On Yom Kippur, we are transcending our physical bodies, embracing our angelic selves. As such, we remove our shoes, our "physical vessels".

Removing our shoes on Yom Kippur is one of the five prohibitions of the day, all of which conform to the same theme: transcendence. Food is that which connects our body and soul, keeping us alive and rooted in the physical world. This is why fasting makes us feel faint, and prolonged hunger causes lack of consciousness and eventually death. On Yom Kippur, we intentionally loosen the connection between body and soul, transcending our physical casing and experiencing one day of living in a purely angelic state.

### **The Opportunity of Yom Kippur**

Yom Kippur provides the unique opportunity to transcend, to experience the infinite and embracing our truest sense of self.

The transcendent experience of Yom Kippur lays the foundation for the rest of the year. While the physical can be destructive if misused, the ideal is not to completely transcend the physical, but rather to *use* the physical in order to reflect something higher. Our goal as humans is not to escape the physical, but to use it as a means of connecting to the transcendent.

Sukkot, the holiday that immediately follows Yom Kippur, embodies this lesson in embracing the physical. Our root must be transcendent, grounded firmly in the spiritual, and then atop that foundation we can descend into the physical and use it in a transcendent way.

May we be inspired to fully experience our angelic selves this Yom Kippur, and then infuse the totality of our spiritual acquisition into our physical life, elevating our actions and intentions as we move this physical world towards its ultimate spiritual root.