



www.synagoguehamptons.org
cs1800@aol.com
631-725-8188

P.O. Box 1800
East Hampton, NY 11937

YAMIM NORA'IM \ ימים נוראים

5771

ROSH HASHANAH TEACHINGS

by

Rabbi Jan R. Uhrbach

ROSH HASHANAH EVENING

Shanah tovah. Welcome to the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons.

You've noticed, I'm sure, that we are using a new machzor, *Machzor Lev Shalem*. The title means, a whole heart. And with all humility (I can say this because my role was quite small relative to others) I think this machzor itself is more whole than earlier ones. I hope, as you dive further into it, that you'll agree.

And I've come to believe the book itself is really a great metaphor for *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah*, often translated as repentance, is better defined as return, or response. A return to a truer self, a response to a Divine demand. And the ultimate goal of *teshuvah* is to come closer to a *lev shalem*, a whole, integrated, inclusive heart. A heart unified within itself, that owns and integrates its own brokenness. A heart unified with other hearts. The process of getting there, the process of *teshuvah*, involves going back to the roots of things, reclaiming or rediscovering parts of ourselves that were lost or buried, confronting, translating and transforming our past and our selves so that it, and we, speak in a healing voice. That's what we tried to do with the machzor, and that's what these days are about.

And so for our learning together this year I want to confront -- and hopefully translate and transform -- some of the metaphors and imagery of the High Holy Days that feel, to me at least, broken, in the hopes of helping them speak in a healing voice.

וּתְפִתַח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזִּכְרוֹנוֹת. וּמֵאֱלֹהֵי יִקְרָא. וְחֹתֶם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ.
... וּמִלְאָכִים יִחַפְזוּן. וְחֵיל וְרַעְדָה לְאַחֲזוּן. וְיֹאמְרוּ הִנֵּה יוֹם הַדִּין.
... וְתִכְתֵּב אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם: בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְכַתְּבוּן. וּבַיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחַתְּמוּן.

God opens the Sefer HaZikhronot, the book in which all memories are recorded, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page.

All the angels will tremble with fear, saying -- the Day of Judgment is here.

You judge every living being, ... inscribing their destiny:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

Hineh Yom HaDin -- the day of judgment is here. The metaphor is problematic -- broken -- for so many reasons. First, the whole notion of judgment is out of fashion these days. It's become something of a dirty word. And, the anthropomorphism of the metaphor is too strong. It's hard to pray these words and not picture God as the great Attorney or Accountant in the sky, keeping the records, weighing the credits and demerits.

But most importantly, the metaphor is broken because it suggests a strict reward and punishment theology: if you've been good you're written into the good list and good things will happen to you, and if you've been bad, bad things will happen to you. Most of us reject that theology as being not only contradicted by our experience in the world, but objectionable morally. And the moral objection stands whether we think of it happening in this life, or in some afterlife. What kind of God would create flawed, fallible, limited creatures and then punish them harshly for being the flawed, fallible, limited creatures they were created to be?

On the other hand, neither can we just take it out. For all the ways in which the Day of Judgment metaphor is off-putting, it remains pretty powerful and effective. It hits us in the solar plexus that we won't be here forever, so we'd better make good use of our time now. And more than that, it's ours -- it's our tradition.

So this year, we're going to go back to some of the early rabbinic sources from which these day of judgment images come, to see how we might understand them differently, and what they can teach us about living our lives today.

Before we do, some preliminaries. First, let's make sure that everyone understands who and what we're talking about. You'll see in the Machzor on page 462 a Glossary of Books, and Glossary of Historical Figures (there's also a Glossary of Hebrew terms on page 460). And you'll see there on page 462 an explanation of what the Talmud is -- that there's one from the land of Israel compiled in the 5th century, one from Babylonia, compiled in the 6th to 7th centuries. So when I speak of the "Rabbis," I'm talking about the sages whose teachings are contained in these texts, and in many of the other contemporaneous texts listed on page 462, who lived basically in the first half of the first millennium, C.E.

Second, I'm not even trying to present a comprehensive survey of what rabbinic literature has to say about the day of judgment. That would be impossible in the time we have, and not really desirable. Nor am I making any claim to balance, nor even objectivity. I've chosen texts to look at that I think will be not only accessible, but especially meaningful, relevant to our lives, sometimes provocative, and I hope elevating.

Finally, and most importantly, in the rabbinic texts about the day of judgment, exactly when this judgment takes place is a fluid thing. In many of the texts we'll look at, it happens when a person dies, or at the end of days, when Messiah comes. The liturgy of the High Holy Days, tells us it's today -- Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the mystical tradition, it happens every night, while a person sleeps. Taken together, we have a tradition that sees this judgment as a continual process -- which means what?

One: we're not talking about something that happens only in some other realm, after life. It may well happen there, but if so it's a continuation of a process that happens in this world, *within* life. We don't wait till we move into another realm to figure out whether we're making the most of life -- we do it now!

Two: more importantly, because it happens continually, *within* life, year after year (maybe night after night), it's actually not talking about an immutable past, which after the fact leads to our being praised or accused, rewarded or punished. In fact, the accounting of the soul (*heshbon hanefesh*) is not primarily about the past at all, but about the present moment, and all future opportunity. Of course we review our track record of character traits and behaviors, but not for the purpose of being rewarded or punished. We do it for the purpose of figuring out how we are living our time now, and how we want to live it in the future. It's not, as we sometimes think of it, an exit interview, when you learn about your severance package. It's more like an annual performance review, the purpose of which is primarily to improve your performance for the coming year.

Three: The continuity of the judgment metaphor -- happening within life and happening after life -- suggests that maybe the distinction between life and death isn't quite so rigid as we sometimes imagine it to be. All this day of judgment imagery on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur challenges us to confront our mortality, not only in the sense of living now, before it's too late, but in the sense that the day of death isn't something that happens only once in the future; it's happening now, today, every day. We're asked to see life as a continual process of dying to an old self and being born anew. And on the other hand, evaluation of our progress doesn't stop when life in this form stops -- we keep assessing, keep growing and learning, even in the next world.

In this sense, the metaphor of judgment is an affirmation that life has meaning -- that our deeds matter, that we matter -- even beyond life as we know it. It's an affirmation that life happens within a larger context, which we can't describe and don't know much about it, but that we affirm *is*

So as we look at these texts, remember that whether the metaphor of the Day of Judgment is framed as happening at the end of days, or at death, or every year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -- it's basically a symbolic language, to focus us on questions of ultimate meaning:

- How do we come closer to fulfilling our purpose?
- how do we live our time well, or at least, a little better than we did last year?
- How do we need to be different to nurture and grow our souls?

In other words, to motivate us to do teshuvah.

So let's look at a text, one of the most famous rabbinic statements about the day of judgment. It's from the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 31a) and it's a teaching by Rabbi Abba ben Yosef bar Hama, better known simply as Rava, a great sage from the 4th century, in Babylon:

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו

"Rava said, When a person is led in for Judgment they say to him"

And then we get a series of six questions that Rava imagines we're asked. But before I tell you what they are, I want to ask you: what do you think the questions are? The general questions, asked of everyone? What do you think is the first question they're asking you?

So here's what Rava thinks:

Shabbat 31a

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו: נשאת ונתת באמונה, קבעת עתים לתורה, עסקת בפריה ורביה, צפית לישועה, פלפלת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר?

Rava said, When a person is led in for Judgment they say to him: Were you honest in your business dealings, did you fix regular times for Torah, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for deliverance, did you sharpen your wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?

What do we notice?

First, Rava sees the "day of judgment" as a series of questions addressed to us. At least to me, it doesn't at all feel like accusation, or cross-examination. There are texts that envision it as "this is what you did and didn't do." But Rava doesn't. Nor does he specify who exactly is asking. It's an open-ended, "They say to him."

In fact, many of the early sources about this judgment, the *heshbon hanefesh* -- specifically envision not an external judge, but an aspect of ourselves doing the questioning. For example:

- . . . When a person is removed from this world, all his deeds come and detail themselves before him, saying, "Thus and such did you do on this date, and thus and such did you do on that date. (Sifre, Devarim, Piska 307)

- The very stones of his house and its beams testify . . . A person's own soul testifies. . . And some say: A person's own limbs testify (Taanit 11a).

In other words, this “day of judgment” really does feel a lot more like a prompt for self-diagnosis, self-evaluation, and self-awareness, than a trial.

What else do we notice? Well, which questions are missing? Some are no surprise. I'll hazard a guess that when I asked you earlier what you thought the questions *would* be, absolutely no one came up with any of the following: Were you rich? Were you famous? Were you powerful? Were you attractive, well-dressed? Did you live in a beautiful house? Surprise, you were right. Not on the test. I say that jokingly, but think about it. Think about all the thoughts and concerns that occupied your consciousness over the last year, the things you spent your energy and time on. What percentage relates to issues and questions which not only aren't here, but which you yourself were absolutely sure *wouldn't* be here?

Some more striking omissions from the list: Were you holy? Were you perfect? Were you free from sin? None of the questions are focused on what we might call “sins” -- not one question about whether you refrained from doing bad things. As Abraham Joshua Heschel notes:

The basic term of Jewish living is “mitzvah” rather than “law” (*din*, judgment). Even the sin of Adam and Eve was described as a loss of a mitzvah. . . . To the mind of the Jew mitzvah bears more reality and is a term more frequently and more prominently used than *averah* (sin) [contrast to Christianity] . . . we have been trained to be more *mitzvah-conscious* than *averah* or sin-conscious.¹

It is no surprise then, that the day of judgment is all about opportunities seized or missed. And so too with our teshuvah, and our *heshbon hanefesh* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: it's not about beating ourselves up, but about figuring out how to live more fully.

Which brings up another point: you may have noticed that all the questions are open ended. Not one of them is phrased as “why didn't you” or “why did you”? They're actually real questions, they're not rhetorical -- the answer isn't assumed. It might, in fact, be, “yes, I did.” *Teshuvah*, the *heshbon hanefesh* we do on the High Holy Days, isn't only the list of things we're ashamed of, the things we've done wrong, the things we failed to do. It's also a taking stock of how we've grown, what we've done right, how we've made a difference.

In fact, Rava says nothing at all about the answers, and it may be that a verbal answer isn't required, or even possible. In Hebrew, the word for answer is “*teshuvah*.” We respond not by saying yes or no, but by doing teshuvah, by changing.

I invite you to think about these questions tonight, and tomorrow and Friday we'll talk about some of them in detail. For now, we are about to turn to the service of *Kiddush Hashanah*, the sanctification of the New Year. This is a new rubric which we, the committee who authored this new machzor, created. We based it on the association between Rosh Hashanah as the date of the creation of the world -- or more accurately, on the a classic debate about whether Rosh Hashanah marks the creation of the world (i.e., Day One), or the creation of Adam, humanity (i.e., Day Six). The section we created honors both. And we created it because of a felt need

1. *Between God and Man*, pp. 186-87.

for it -- a need for something, on this first night of Rosh Hashanah, to expressly mark the start of a new year, and to sanctify it formally.

But what does *Kiddush HaShanah* really mean? How does one sanctify time, make it holy? The practical, halakhic answer is that we say a blessing, usually over time. That's what kiddush on Friday night, or tonight on the festival of Rosh Hashanah, is. We take the cup of wine, and over it we say the blessing which praises God for setting aside special time. Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, etc. It is intended to mark the transition into special, elevated time -- so that we enter that period of time within intentionality, a sense of holiness. An awareness that this time is dedicated to a higher purpose, to God.

But then how do we understand, *Kiddush HaShanah*? Not the sanctification of the *festival* of the new year, these two days of Rosh HaShanah, but the sanctification of the year itself -- the whole year? Well, if sanctifying time means dedicating one's time to a higher purpose, to God, making time holy by living in it well -- we should be doing that with all of our time, with all of our lives, every day. It will look different on Shabbat or a festival than it does during the week, but *all* of our time should be dedicated, sanctified, lived with intention.

This really is what all the metaphor of the day of judgment, and Rava's six questions, are about. It's not about being rewarded or punished, it's not primarily about the afterlife, it's about living with greater intention. It's about fulfilling the purpose for which we were created, and sanctifying life here on earth. Or as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it: "The most significant intellectual act is to decide what the most fundamental question is to live by."²

We turn now to page 20, to dedicate and sanctify the gift of this new year.

2. *Who Is Man*, pp. 107-08.

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 1

Hineh Yom HaDin. Here it is, the Day of Judgment. We began last night speaking about the meaning of this very problematic metaphor, central to the High Holy Days. As I said last night, the Day of Judgment imagery -- once associated only with the day of death or end of days -- was expanded to taking place also on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and thereby transformed -- from a post-life review of an immutable past, to a constant mid-life assessment, with an eye to the future. And we spoke of reconceiving the metaphor -- thinking not of a trial and a Judge, weighing our merits and demerits to determine our reward or punishment, but an internal self-assessment -- *heshbon hanefesh* (literally the accounting of the soul) -- for the purpose of correcting our course, living more meaningfully, sanctifying our time. We spoke of the Day of Judgment imagery as symbolic language, to push us to do teshuvah -- not so that we will receive a reward, but so that life will be more rewarding.

So throughout these Yamim Noraim, we'll be looking at rabbinic texts -- primarily from the Talmud, that get at this question of ultimate values, how to live our lives, how to do *teshuvah*, through the metaphor of Day of Judgment. We began with this text, in which Rava (a 4th century sage in Babylon) said:

Shabbat 31a

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו: נשאת ונתת באמונה, קבעת עתים לתורה, עסקת בפריה ורביה, צפית לישועה, פלפלת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר?

Rava said, When a person is led in for Judgment they say to him: Were you honest in your business dealings, did you fix regular times for Torah, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for deliverance, did you sharpen your wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?

Last night we focused on the very idea of being asked questions (i.e., the “day of judgment” isn’t a list of accusations), and about the nature of the questions in general. Now I want to zero in on one in particular: question number one: *נשאת ונתת באמונה*. The *peshat* (the plain meaning) is: “Were you honest in your business dealings?” A little surprising, no? The first question is about business ethics.

Well, when it comes to money (and the other forms of currency in our business lives: power, success, the ego), there are so many opportunities and temptations to fudge things a little (or in some cases, a *lot*). And, earning a living occupies so much of our waking life. So good business ethics may be a kind of a hallmark, or litmus test, of honesty and integrity generally, both reflecting our overall character, and powerfully shaping it. If we can make morally there, we’ll make it morally anywhere.

In addition, placing business ethics first on the list is a kind of polemic, combatting a worldview that relegates religion to the synagogue, but wants to keep it out of the boardroom or the factory or the farm. Judaism, of course, stands for precisely the opposite. The Torah is filled with commandments relating to business ethics:

- You may not keep two sets of weights and measures, larger and smaller.
- You must pay your workers on time, and you must treat them with dignity.
- You can’t charge excessive interest, and you may not take collateral in a way that is demeaning to the debtor, will cause undue harm, or undermine his business.

And on and on. Not to mention the tractates of Talmud and law codes explicating and expanding these laws, with great detail and extraordinary sensitivity.

We are using this new machzor, Machzor Lev Shalem. The title “a whole heart,” has many meanings, including wholeness, integration, a consistency in who we are. And last night, as we prayed the *Kiddush Hashanah* (the sanctification of the new year), we spoke about making holy not only special time like Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah, but the entire year. This question, נשאת ונתת באמונה, speaks to both these issues. It reminds us that the business world isn't some “unholy” realm -- that there are opportunities for sanctification everywhere. It reminds us that we're not supposed to be one person at home, or in synagogue, and entirely another in the office. That what happens here on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the prayers and the Torah and the self-reflection, is supposed to permeate all of life. It's like the opposite of Vegas: what happens here isn't supposed to stay here. It remind us that the way we do business is a religious issue.

But of course, whenever we read a Jewish text, we don't stop at only one meaning. And for a mere 3 words, נשאת ונתת באמונה is an extraordinarily rich question.

נשאת ונתת, corresponds almost literally to the English idiom, “give and take” (in the Hebrew it's reversed, “take and give”), and as in English, it means “give and take” not only in business, but in general. נשאת ונתת באמונה refers to:

- The give and take of the broader world of commerce -- how we deal with tradespeople, shopkeepers, and domestic help; what and how we consume, as well as the consequences of our consumption; all the ways that we meet and manage our physical needs.
- Give and take as citizens of the United States -- how we pay our taxes, how we vote, how we serve our country (in the military or otherwise) -- and as stakeholders in the State of Israel.
- Give and take in schools, neighborhoods, synagogues, and other communal settings.
- Give and take intellectually, the back and forth of discussion.
- And give and take in our personal relationships -- how we give and receive love, support, critique, concrete help; all the ways we meet and manage our emotional needs.

In all of these contexts, are we honest and trustworthy in our giving? Do we keep our commitments? Are we clear and straightforward about what we expect to receive when we give, or are here hidden agendas and strings attached? Are the emotions we project true to what we feel?

Are we able to receive with integrity? Do we ask for what we need honestly, forthrightly, without being manipulative? Can we receive help, or praise, without feeling guilty or embarrassed?

Do we give and receive in roughly equal measure, with a sense of fairness? Or are we “takers” -- always looking to get the most and give the least? Can we be relied upon to pull our weight in all of these various contexts -- with our families and close friends, with our colleagues and co-workers, in our country, in our synagogue, in our obligations to the Jewish people?

Nor is the question particularistically Jewish; it doesn't ask, are you ethical in your give and take with other Jews? So -- do you share freedoms and opportunities with other groups? We have a situation now with the library in East Hampton which is an absolute shanda -- opposition to expanding the children's wing of the library, primarily based on wanting to provide a space for

the children of immigrant groups, in which people are actually saying things like, “why can’t *they* have their own library? If you want more information, speak to Rachel or Robbie who are here, and have been very active in advocating for the expansion. Do we give other groups the same benefit of the doubt that we ourselves want? We would be horrified if anyone saw the behavior of Bernie Madoff as a reflection of the business ethics of all Jews, and we would immediately cry anti-semitism. Yet how many of us, in our heart of hearts, suspect Muslims in general because of the actions of some Muslims on 9/11?

How do you collect your emotional and moral debts? For example, when someone owes you an apology do you charge “excessive interest?” Do you take your collateral in a way that is demeaning, or unduly burdensome?

Do we pay “wages” on time? When you owe an apology, is it prompt and complete? What about when you owe thanks or acknowledgement, a favor?

And my personal favorite: do we have one set of weights and measures? Or do we measure ourselves by one yardstick, and everyone else with another?

Now, we’ve been focusing on the “give and take” part, and translating באמונה as “honestly, with integrity.” But באמונה is also multi-valenced in meaning.

For example, נשאת ונתת באמונה can mean not only are you trustworthy in the give and take of life, but also, do you trust?

Trust who? First: yourself. Do you trust that you have something worthwhile to give? Do you trust that you can give and receive -- take in new things, let go of other things, receive help, give of yourself -- without being diminished, or losing yourself, or eroding your power and essential dignity?

Second: other people. Do you expect the best of people? Do you trust them to be honest, and not hurtful? Or do you move through the world being overly self-protective, and suspicious?

To be clear, I’m not advocating foolish naivete. We are all too aware that not everyone can be trusted, in the business world or elsewhere, and that few of us can be trusted all the time. It’s about finding a balance. Trusting ourselves, but not to the extent of arrogance. Trusting others, while still responsibly protecting ourselves and others from genuine harm.

This is a value judgment, not a blanket rule, analogous to the presumption of innocence. The presumption of innocence represents a value judgment that it’s better to free a guilty person than convict an innocent one. Our question represents the value judgment that it’s better to be taken advantage of sometimes, than to be unnecessarily distrustful, or to give way to cynicism and constriction of the soul.

But again, we may ask: well ok, even so, why should this be question number one in our *heshbon hanefesh*, our self-accounting? We can understand the religious imperative to be trustworthy -- what is the religious significance of trusting others?

First, trusting is a religious issue -- it’s one of Rava’s six questions -- because trust in ourselves and in others is essential for change, and essential to *teshuvah*. Asking or granting forgiveness, extending one’s self to repair a relationship, or to work on ourselves, is a form of נשאת ונתת

באמונה. It involves trusting another to be generous, kind, compassionate. And trusting that we ourselves have the capacity to receive guidance, rebuke. Trusting that we, and others, can take in something that's hard to hear, and respond by changing.

Second, trusting is a religious issue because not trusting is a kind of lashon hara, slander. It assumes that others will take advantage or be dishonest. And while the negative impact of dishonesty is obvious, failures of trust can be equally destructive. To be suspected is a terrible affront. It's deeply wounding. And sometimes, self-fulfilling. Expecting the worst subtly suggests that the worst behavior is to be expected; it establishes bad behavior as the norm. On the contrary, trusting, assuming the best, subtly gives *hizuk* -- strength -- to the noblest side of everyone.

Finally, trust is a religious value because it's inextricably intertwined with our relationship to God. Which brings us to the primary meaning of אמונה: faith, and specifically faith in God. We are, after all, created by God, in God's image. So allowing ourselves to become cynical, not trusting human beings -- ourselves, other individuals, or other groups -- is a kind of slander of God, and subtly erodes our faith in God.

But what do we mean by faith in God? Like faith in humanity, faith in God is not about naivete. It's not a belief that "if I'm honest, I'll succeed" -- plenty of honest businesses fail. It's not a belief that I don't have to work, or be responsible for my own well-being, and God will simply "provide." And it's not a belief that things will always work out the way I want them to, that all risks pay off, that I'll always get what I want, that I'll be spared loss, illness or poverty, or any other kind of suffering and pain. It's not a belief in God as *santa clause*, who keeps me safe and gives me what I want if only I'm good. It needn't be belief in an anthropomorphized, interventionist God at all.

What *does* it mean? Let's come back to Rava's question -- נשאת ונתת באמונה -- which we can now translate, "Do you engage in the give and take of life, with faith?" It turns out that this particular question is associated with the laws of agriculture. I don't want to take the time now to go through the textual analysis and show you why, just trust me on this one, or you can look on your own later -- it's linked to agriculture. What's significant about that?

Perhaps nowhere more than in working the land do we sense the presence of something, some One, beyond ourselves. First, because it's nearly impossible for a farmer to believe that his success or failure rests entirely on his own effort or skill. No matter how hard the farmer works, and no matter how skilled, whether anything grows depends -- even today, with all our technology, but even more so in the 4th century, when Rava lived -- on forces beyond ourselves. And second, because of the wonder of it all. The whole idea of something growing -- of a seed giving way to a shoot, of roots absorbing nutrients and nourishing a plant -- all of it -- is a miracle that we couldn't possibly create on our own.

אמונה -- faith -- is a kind of "farmer consciousness." Faith as awareness that the work of our hands is not solely the work of *our* hands. When times are hard, in a comforting sense: there is something beyond us which brings miraculous things, something beyond us on which we can rely -- we're not just on our own. And in a humbling sense, when we can be seduced by success: there is something beyond us on which we are dependent, which we cannot control, and in the presence of which we are both vulnerable and responsible -- we're not just on our own. אמונה is a kind of humility, the humility to know that we are simultaneously, paradoxically, tremendously powerful and utterly powerless.

נשאת ונתת באמונה -- do you engage in the give and take of life with “farmer consciousness” -- an awareness that there’s something beyond yourself? And more than that, do you behave in consonance with that awareness?

Because actually, the Hebrew word אמונה doesn’t really mean “belief in,” or “faith in.” The word carries the implication of loyalty, fealty, and is probably best translated as “faithfulness to” -- to someone, to God, or to something -- moral commitments, higher values, principles, Torah. Which may be why in Rava’s imagination the question of faith is very carefully framed not as something we *have* or don’t have, but as something we *live* or don’t live.

נשאת ונתת באמונה -- “Do you give and take in the world in a way that is faithful to something beyond yourself?” Do you have higher commitments, higher values, which direct how you run your business, how you give, how you receive, how you run your life? Do you have a vision of who you want to be and what kind of world you want to live in? Does it give you the strength and discipline to bracket your own self-interest (wealth, success, power, comfort, fulfillment of our desires), and to transcend certain emotions (like fear, resentment, hurt), in service of that vision?

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes beautifully about why the way we manage our needs is a religious issue. He calls needs “spiritual opportunities,”³ and speaks of evaluating our needs in the light of higher ends, values and goals. We don’t say, “Needs justify the ends,” but on the contrary: “Ends justify the needs.”⁴ That’s נשאת ונתת באמונה.

It’s not easy to do. There’s a fabulous ḥasidic commentary to this effect by Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.⁵ His understanding of נשאת ונתת באמונה is based on the notion that a lot of business is done on credit. And he says it’s meant to remind us that the pleasures of this world are like ready cash, they yield an immediate sense of reward, and are therefore tempting. But that’s not always true of higher values -- of faithfulness to Torah. That’s all done, so to speak, on credit. Credit and faith.

נשאת ונתת באמונה. Do you understand that the richest rewards in life are always on credit, and they’re not always the “reward” we want? Living true to our values often comes at a high price. Good guys don’t always get ahead. Honesty sometimes costs us income. Trusting others sometimes means being taken advantage of, or being hurt. A life of integrity doesn’t always feel good, doesn’t always “pay off” in either material terms, or in ease and comfort. Sometimes it’s just hard. Do you have faith that it’s worth it? Not because you’ll get some “reward” in the world to come, or because you’ll be spared suffering, but because that’s how we sanctify time. But because a life of integrity is the only life worth living.

It’s not easy *ever*, and for most of us, it’s not something we can maintain all the time. We’re trustworthy, except when we’re not. We trust ourselves, except when we don’t. We’re trusting of others, except when we aren’t. We have a sure sense of meaning, of purpose, of something beyond ourselves. Except when we can’t. That’s why faithfulness is so important -- because it’s the commitment that brings us back, that gets us through those times, when faith fails us. And it’s why, next to the prayer V’khol Ma’aminim, which focuses on what “we all believe,” we on the

3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, pp. 263-64

4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 182

5. Toldot Yaakov Yosef on Miketz:

Machzor committee put it comments and readings about doubt (see e.g., pp. 147-48).

This is נשאת ונתת באמונה -- and this is what the metaphor of crowning God as sovereign, and the service of *malkhuyot*, which we will turn to in a few minutes, really means. It's about that awareness of something beyond ourselves -- whether we envision a commanding presence of the King, or as in Denise Levertov's poem on page 155, a thread that gently pulls at us, that demands response -- and it's about commitment. Commitment to overarching meaning and purpose over all of life. It's about faith in the ultimate meaningfulness of life, even beyond the limits of this life.

In a sense, it's faith that even though the metaphor of the Day of Judgment doesn't mean I'm going to be rewarded, or punished, I'm accountable to asking and answering this very question: נשאת ונתת באמונה.

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2

Shabbat 31a

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו: נשאת ונתת באמונה, קבעת עתים לתורה, עסקת בפריה ורביה, צפית לישועה, פלפלת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר?

Rava said, When a person is led in for Judgment they say to him: Were you honest in your business dealings, did you fix regular times for Torah, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for deliverance, did you sharpen your wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?

Throughout these Yamim Noraim, we've been looking at the metaphor of the Day of Judgment. Once associated only with death or the end of days, it was extended to taking place also on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And in that extension, as we've said, it was transformed -- from a post-life review of an immutable past, to a constant mid-life assessment, with an eye to the future. So when we encounter the Day of Judgment imagery -- in the liturgy or in our study texts -- we should read it as a call to self-assessment -- *heshbon hanefesh*, the accounting of the soul -- for the purpose of correcting our course. It's symbolic language, to push us to do teshuvah -- not so that we will receive a reward, but so that life will be more rewarding.

We've been studying in particular the text I just read, from the Talmud. The six questions we'll be asked on judgment, or the six questions we're asking of ourselves today. Yesterday we talked about question one. Today, let's turn to question two: קבעת עתים לתורה -- did you fix set times for Torah?

And note, the question is not, "did you know a lot of Torah?", nor, "were you smart, good at studying?" The question is קבעת -- did you fix, same word used for affixing a mezuzah to the door -- עתים, set times, for Torah.

Why fixing set times? Here's Rashi, writing in the 11th century:

קבעת עתים - לפי שאדם צריך להתעסק בדרך ארץ, שאם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה הוצרך לקבוע עתים לתורה דבר קצוב, שלא ימשך כל היום לדרך ארץ
"Did you fix times." Given that a person needs to engage in worldly pursuits, because if there are no worldly pursuits there will be no Torah, it is necessary to fix set times for Torah, so that a person will not simply be drawn after worldly pursuits all day long

In other words, get your priorities straight. If we're not disciplined in pursuing our values -- if we don't set fixed times to attend to the needs of our souls -- we may never do it. We'll sit at the computer and start answering emails or surfing the web, we'll do the laundry, run our errands, and on and on. We know this.

But fixing set times isn't just about getting distracted by other things. Like the body, the soul has needs. But unlike the body, the soul rarely announces its needs, and when it does, it's the small still voice, not the great shofar. It's hard to hear. Most times, we're completely unaware that our soul even has needs, until we start to meet them. To quote Patsy Cline, "I was hungry and I didn't even know it." So unless we set aside regular time to attend to the soul's needs, we may never feel those needs, and so never meet them.

What are the soul's needs? Prayer, spiritual community, giving and making a difference, and -- learning and inspiration. קבעת עתים לתורה.

What do the rabbis mean by Torah, and why is this the priority? It's a flexible term, and can mean anything from the scroll in the ark containing the five books of Moses, ever more expansively to include whole the Hebrew Bible, to all the commentary and literature based on scripture.

But when the rabbis say "Torah", what they really mean is learning that is transformative. Learning that is generative, creative -- that leads to more learning, that inspires us to act, that shapes and guides our action. Learning that changes how we feel, how we experience and respond to the world. Learning that touches the soul. Sometimes the content -- some *thing* we study -- helps us do or be different. Other times, it's simply the process of engaging in Torah, which the rabbis understood as a way of engaging with, being with, God. Either way, true Torah is like constant teshuvah; it transforms the self.

So if the Day of Judgment metaphor is intended to push us to confront questions of ultimate meaning, to do *teshuvah* -- Torah is the mechanism by which we do that. It teaches us what values to be faithful to; it shapes our vision of who we want to be and what kind of world we want to live in, and motivates and inspires us to fulfill that vision.

This is why Torah is not only a significant part of Rava's vision of the "day of judgment," but by some accounts is the first and ONLY focus of our *heshbon hanefesh*. It's why Torah is *the* quintessential Jewish value.⁶

Now, looking at Rava's six questions, there are two more that deal with shaping and deepening our consciousness -- with Torah.⁷ Specifically, questions five, פלפלת בחכמה, "did you sharpen your wisdom?" and six, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר, "did you understand one thing from another?"

What is פלפלת בחכמה? *Hokhmah*, is usually translated as wisdom. For our purposes, think of it as the results of our learning: the totality of what we think we know and understand about the world -- including secular knowledge -- and especially, the Torah we've acquired. And פלפלת? *Pilpul* is a form of dialectal debate and argument, usually about *halakhah*, Jewish law. The word is related to the word for pepper -- something sharp, incisive -- and it's primary meaning here is about challenge.

פלפלת בחכמה: do you challenge what you think you know? Do you participate in debate, so that your own wisdom and understanding will be made more precise, expanded, or -- changed altogether? Do you engage with people who see things differently? When you do, are you open to being persuaded? Do you regularly change your mind, your views, your beliefs and understandings, as you learn and grow? Do you seek out opportunities to be proved wrong?

How important is this practice of פלפלת בחכמה? There's a famous story in the Talmud about

6. Someone who doesn't feel the need to study, the Talmud says, is like someone who exempts himself from drinking water. Kiddushin 40b.

7. It is possible to read them all that way. See, e.g. Hagigah 14a (זה שידוע לישא וליתן) ואיש מלחמה - (במלחמתה של תורה).

Rabbi Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish.⁸ They were *bar plugta* -- debating partners; they disagreed and argued about everything. One day the argument got personal, and they were both deeply hurt. Rabbi Yoḥanan refused to forgive. Resh Lakish became terribly ill. Then Resh Lakish died, and Rabbi Yoḥanan was inconsolable. Hoping to comfort him, his friends sent Rabbi Eleazar -- who was really smart -- to learn with him. What happened? Every time Rabbi Yoḥanan would say something, Rabbi Eleazar would say, "Here's a text that agrees with you!" It made Rabbi Yoḥanan nuts:

"Are you like Resh Lakish?" He would complain. "Whenever I would posit something, he would challenge me with twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, and through that the teaching was expanded and more fully comprehended. But you say, 'there's a teaching which supports you.' Don't I myself know that I'm right?"

Rabbi Yoḥanan never found anyone who could really challenge him. And he never recovered. He continued to grieve, until he lost touch with reality. Eventually, the Rabbis had compassion for him; they prayed that he be relieved of his suffering, and he died.

This story, and Rava's question, both point to a fundamental human need for challenge; for being proved wrong -- without it, life is not worth living. "Don't I know that I'm right!" Rabbi Yoḥanan cried. *פלפלת בחכמה* is about seeking to be challenged in all the ways that like Rabbi Yoḥanan, we know that we're right!

- Right about our beliefs, and how we make sense of the world.
- Right about our politics, our moral judgments, our science, and our Judaism.
- Right about other people, individuals or groups -- what they did or didn't do, what's motivating them, what's in their minds, who they *are*.
- Right about ourselves -- our behavior, how we're perceived, the self-image we all create for ourselves, who *we are*

Why is this so essential to life's meaning? Partly it's about being known -- we all hunger for someone who knows us well enough to call us on our stuff, and without it, it is possible to die of loneliness. In fact, there's a Jewish version of Patrick Henry's famous, "give me liberty or give me death." The Talmud says, *o hevruṭa o metuta* -- give me a study partner and friend who can really challenge me, or give me death. And it's partly also because without challenge, we don't grow; we don't come closer to fulfilling our purpose in life. And growth and change -- *teshuvah* -- is the essence of life.

No one -- least of all Rabbi Yoḥanan -- says it's easy. On the contrary, the phrase that is used for Resh Lakish's challenges to Rabbi Yoḥanan is *makshi li* -- his name is a play on this, *makshi li, Lakish*. It means difficulty. The one who makes life difficult for me.

פלפלת בחכמה is risky -- it requires us to take a stand, which in turn makes us vulnerable. Some people go through life never really saying what they think and believe; never putting themselves out there -- either out of a misguided sense of what humility requires, or as a way of playing it safe. If you never commit to a position, you can't be argued with, and you'll never be proved wrong.

On the other hand, some people argue and debate endlessly, but without really listening to

8. Bava Metzia 84a

anyone else. Which leads us to an alternative translation of פלפלת בחכמה, that is, “when you engage in debate and argument, do you do it wisely?” Meaning, do you debate for the purpose of examining and refining your beliefs, and helping another do the same? פלפלת בחכמה is *not* argument and debate to prove that you’re smarter or more knowledgeable. It’s not argument to demean or control, to embarrass or browbeat another, or just to pick a fight and express anger. Nor is the real purpose to convince the other that we’re right -- it’s precisely to discover where we may be wrong.

And, פלפלת בחכמה requires that we engage with people who are different from ourselves, and in this sense, has become very counter-cultural. It is increasingly easier to become increasingly insular, segregated, and polarized in our society. The internet and social technology allows us now to engage only with affinity groups, people who share our beliefs. The same is true of the news. It’s blatantly obvious to all of us which news outlets will support our liberal views, and which will support our conservative views. We never even have to listen to the other side.

Yesterday, I mentioned that Rava’s first question, did you engage in the give and take of life with faith, was associated with the laws of agriculture. This question, פלפלת בחכמה, is associated with the laws of sacrifices. When we open ourselves to being wrong, we sacrifice our sense of security, we sacrifice the satisfaction of being right. Sometimes, it’s a sacrifice also of protection -- we hold on to certain beliefs, and facts, to protect ourselves from painful feelings, such as fears, inadequacies, old wounds. פלפלת בחכמה can be painful, embarrassing, even when we’re wrong about small things. Being wrong about *major* things can feel like a terrible loss.

And it can have far-reaching implications in our lives. It really is almost a sacrifice of our lives, or at least our sense of self. It’s a form of willingly dying to the person we used to be, in order to draw nearer to God, in order to come closer to fulfilling our purpose on earth. In a sense, that’s really what the pre-enactment of death on Yom Kippur is all about: one long immersion in being wrong.

Now, the last of Rava’s six questions -- הבנת דבר מתוך דבר -- is an entirely differently mode of working on our consciousness. We can translate, “do you understand one thing *from* another,” meaning can you draw inferences? Or we can read “do you understand one thing *from within* another” -- a thing within a thing, a word within a word -- referring to a kind of suppleness of mind, a poet’s sensitivity, the capacity to appreciate nuance, and subtext, to “read” -- text, people, life -- on many levels.

And הבנת דבר מתוך דבר also means so much more. *Havanta* -- or the noun form *binah* -- understanding, is often considered a higher level than *hokhmah*, wisdom.⁹ Where *hokhmah* is all sharp, clear, articulation, separations and distinctions, *binah* is intuitive, inarticulate, webs of connections and associations, the ability to receive and interpret “hints.” *Binah* is wholeness, the full integration of what we’ve learned into our being. *Really* getting it, not only in our heads, but in our hearts and even our bodies -- so that it truly becomes part of us.

By analogy, whenever you’re learning a new physical activity, whether it be a tennis stroke, or a guitar riff, there’s a point where you’ve learned what you’re supposed to be doing, and you know it. You can describe it, and sometimes you can do it -- but you really have to focus. Then there’s the point where it’s just part of you. And you don’t have to think about the technique any

9. Rashi on Shabbat 31a

more. It's part of your muscle memory, your body does it automatically. *Binah* -- הבנת דבר -- מתוך דבר -- is about getting to that level with Torah -- it's about getting it in one's spiritual and emotional muscle memory, so that we do the right thing, the right way, automatically, without having to think about it.

This is probably why it's Rava's last question -- it's the culmination of all the others, and the pinnacle of fulfilling our purpose in life. *If* we make regular times for Torah and allow ourselves to be transformed by it, *and* we make sure to constantly challenge what we think we know, eventually we will internalize all that learning so that it becomes automatic. We will even, *especially*, internalize the experience of being wrong. When we practice פלפלת בחכמה, eventually we get used to moving about the world with a sense of provisional understanding -- holding what we know with a very light touch -- so that continually expecting and reaching new understandings, being wrong -- becomes second nature, an automatic way of being. That is what it means to be truly a *ba'al teshuvah* -- a technical term for someone returning to Judaism -- but literally, "a master of return," someone who has mastered the art of continual reinvention of the self, the art of changing one's mind.

הבנת דבר מתוך דבר, "do you understand one thing from another" is about humility in our knowing and understanding, an awareness that we never really get to the complete truth. Because if we understand one thing from another thing, then every "thing" we understand opens a doorway into something else that we don't yet understand.¹⁰ And if every "thing" we understand opens a doorway to further understanding then we always have to be listening for the next meaning, the next message.

That's the higher meaning of the shofar. The shofar is pure sound, meaningful sound, without words. That's הבנת דבר מתוך דבר. Do you hear the words, and then the sound beneath the words? And then do you hear the meaning beneath the sound beneath the words? And on and on. To hear the shofar is to be aroused to be listening always, for the message within the message, the next hint that we're meant to hear, knowing that there's always another level of understanding that we haven't yet attained.

Now, when we get to this level of הבנת דבר מתוך דבר, of really integrating the transformational power of Torah into our being, something else happens: we gain the ability to sense and discern what it is we're meant to do, what our purpose is, not only from the Torah text, but from within ourselves and from the world around us. We become able to take all the hints that life offers,¹¹ and we become able to innovate and be creative.

Which takes us to the ultimate reason why learning is so front and center in Rava's -- and nearly all the sages' -- visions of the "day of judgment". We learn in order to transform ourselves, to do *teshuvah*, to become masters of *teshuvah*, and we do *that* in order to teach. Every person is a teacher -- we teach our children and our students, obviously, but also our friends, our co-workers, our parents. Each of us is a role model for everyone else. And ultimately, the purpose of life is to become a teacher of *Torah*. Not that we should all go to rabbinical school, but that we should all live in such a way that our lives become Torah.

We've been talking about the "Day of Judgment" metaphor. One of the images prominently associated with that metaphor is the Book of Life, *Sefer HaHayim*. And just as the Day of

10. See, e.g., Sfat Emet on Deut. 28:1 (tr. by Arthur Green)

11. See Bereshit Rabbah 26:1; Rashi on Deut. 1:13

Judgment isn't about an anthropomorphized God sitting in court handing out rewards and punishments, so the Book of Life isn't some big book in the sky in which we get inscribed for another year of life or not. The Book of Life is Torah -- the ongoing river of transformative teaching that flows through time. And the question is whether our lives are worthy of being included in it.

There's a great midrash about this. It takes the example of two people in the Torah (Reuven and Boaz), who did good things, the right things, but not with full hearts, full generosity of spirit. And it imagines each of them saying afterwards, "if only I had known that God would be writing my deeds in the Torah, I would have done so much more -- I would have gone the extra mile"¹² That's the import of the *Sefer HaHayim*, the book of life. If only we knew -- as we *do* know -- that someone would be learning from our deeds, writing Torah with our lives, what would we do differently?

Which takes us, finally, to what I think is the most stunning interpretation of the "Day of Judgment." There is an early rabbinic midrash that says that on that day, a person's Torah will be heard by the Holy Blessed One, by God.¹³ In other words, this *heshbon hanefesh*, the accounting of the soul, that we do -- whether at the end of days, on the day we die, today on Rosh Hashanah, or every day -- isn't only a self-evaluation in which we review our deeds to see what we've learned and what we still need to learn. It's also, so to speak, about what *God* has learned, and will learn, from us.

Each of us has the capacity to advance humanity's collective understanding in some way. Each person's spiritual, emotional, intellectual, moral growth is a kind of discovery or realization, of some aspect of God, never before known in the world. Through the particular person that we are, through our unique effect to figure out how to live life, and in our daily struggle to do a little better at it, each of us reveals, little by little, ever more of the Divine.

So, looking back, what did your life this past year teach the world, teach God? And what's your lesson plan for the year to come?

12. Vayikra Rabbah 34:8

13. Midrash Tanhuma, Ki Tavo, Perek 4 (4th - 6th century)