

# THE EAST 55TH STREET CONSERVATIVE SYNAGOGUE

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ימים נוראים

DAYS OF AWE



ROSH HASHANAH

5770/2009

# ROSH HASHANAH #1: HAYOM

כלל גדול בעבודת ה', שלא ישים לנגד עיניו כי אם אותו היום שעומד בו  
One of the most important principles in serving God is to think only of today. . . .

-- Rav Nachman of Bratslav

Rav Nachman of Bratslav was born in the Ukraine, in 1772, into a family of distinguished rabbinic lineage. He was descended from the Baal Shem Tov on his mother's side and the MaHaRal of Prague on his father's. Recognized early as a prodigy, he attracted his first real disciple soon after becoming bar mitzvah. Nachman suffered tremendously, living a life marked by repeated loss and grief, inner struggle and deep emotional pain, external conflict and persecution, illness, passionate yearning and crushing disappointment.

Nachman left an extraordinary legacy of magnificent Torah, informed by his intense spirituality, his massive learning, his profound insight into the human psyche, and his own pain and personal struggles, making him one of the greatest and most influential teachers in Jewish history. Nachman is the rabbinic equivalent of a "cross-over artist" in music; he appeals to everyone from opera buffs to country music fans. There is a ḥasidic sect dedicated to his teachings (to this day, thousands of his followers flow to Uman to spend Rosh Hashanah near his grave), and at the same time he is one of the darlings of the ultra-liberal Jewish renewal movement. There is also an entire sub-genre of current Israeli music inspired entirely by him.

And Nachman's life demonstrates one of his core teachings, particularly salient for us on Rosh Hashanah: that a life is measured not by the number of days, but by the content of those days. At 35 he contracted tuberculosis, and he died 3 years later at the age of 38.

כלל גדול בעבודת ה', שלא ישים לנגד עיניו כי אם אותו היום שעומד בו, הן בעסק הפרנסה והצטרפותו צריך, שלא יחשב מיום לחברו כמובא בספרים, וכן בעבודת ה' לא ישים לנגד עיניו כי אם אותו היום ואותה השעה לבד. כי כשרוצין לכנס בעבודת ה', נדמה להאדם כאלו הוא משא כבד ואי אפשר לו לשא משא כבד כזאת. אבל כשיחשב שאין לו רק אותו היום, לא יהיה לו משא כלל. גם שלא ידחה מיום ליום לאמר, מחר אתחיל; מחר אתפלל בכונה ובכח כראוי וכיוצא בזה. כי אין לו להאדם בעולמו כי אם אותו היום ואותה השעה שעומד בו. כי יום המחרת הוא עולם אחר לגמרי. היום אם בקולו תשמעו, היום דיקא

One of the most important principles in serving God is to think only of today. . . .  
Because a person has nothing in this world except the day and the hour in which we stand now. For tomorrow is a completely different world. As the Torah says, "Today, if you would listen to My voice." Literally, today (*hayom*) (Likkutei Etzot, Yirah v'Avodah #16; see Likkutei Moharan 272).

*Unetanneh tokef kedushat hayom* -- "Let us speak of the sacred power of today." *Hayom t'amtzeinu, hayom t'varkheinu, hayom t'gadleinu* -- "Today You strengthen us, today You bless us, today You exalt us." *Hayom harat olam* - "Today the world is born." *Hayom* -- the sacred power of "today" -- is one of the most prominent themes of Rosh Hashanah liturgy. Naturally, we are especially conscious of the moment, of the day, on Rosh Hashanah. As the year turns, the passage and preciousness of time, as well as our mortality, weighs heavily upon us.

But if we focus on hayom -- on the power of today -- only on Rosh Hashanah, we've missed the point. Nachman teaches: "The key to everything comes from its beginning" (עקר כל הדברים הן) (ההתחלה). The way something begins determines its entire course; it sets the tone for the whole. So where we are now, at the beginning of the year, where our thoughts are now, sets the course for the entire year. And that is the more profound reason why we emphasize *hayom* at the

beginning of new year. The beginning determines the course of the whole, and our goal is to carry this consciousness of *hayom*, today, into every day, every *hayom*, of the year to come.

Why is it vitally important, essential to serving God, to think only of today? On one level, this is good practical advice that most of us probably know, but about which we could use a reminder. The focus on *hayom* -- i.e., don't waste today by focusing on the past or the future -- is the essence of "length of days." It's true when times are good: how often we miss the blessing of the moment because we're stuck in yesterday or anticipating tomorrow! And it's true when times are difficult. The discipline to see only today can be a source of strength and comfort when we are frightened; it helps us find joy and blessing simply in being, now, regardless of what was or is to come. And in those times when it takes everything we have just to get through today, it's very comforting to know that, in reality, that's all we ever need to do.

And this is particularly true in the specific context of the transformational work of *teshuvah*, our central task on these Yamim Noraim. What is *teshuvah*? It is often translated as repentance, and refers to the work of doing an accounting of soul (*heshbon hanefesh*), determining what apologies we owe to whom and making them, making amends for our wrongdoing. It also means to return -- to a truer, more authentic path, or a true more authentic self -- and to respond, specifically to the Divine demand. And it refers to repentance not only in the sense of making amends for specific deeds, but in regard to repairing our character and qualities. And it is especially in this context, Nachman teaches, that thinking only of today is essential to serving God. He writes:

כלל גדול בעבודת ה', שלא ישים לנגד עיניו כי אם אותו היום שעומד בו, הן בעסק הפרנסה והצטרכותו צריך, שלא יחשב מיום לחברו כמובא בספרים, וכן בעבודת ה' לא ישים לנגד עיניו כי אם אותו היום ואותה השעה לבד. כי כשרוצין לכנס בעבודת ה', נדמה להאדם כאלו הוא משא כבד ואי אפשר לו לשא משא כבד כזאת. אבל כשיחשב שאין לו רק אותו היום, לא יהיה לו משא כלל. גם שלא ידחה מיום ליום לאמר, מחר אתחיל; מחר אתפלל בכונה ובכח כראוי וכיוצא בזה. כי אין לו להאדם בעולמו כי אם אותו היום ואותה השעה שעומד בו. כי יום המחרת הוא עולם אחר לגמרי. היום אם בקולו תשמעו, היום דיקא

When a person wants to begin serving God it seems like a heavy burden which you will never be able to bear. But if you think that you have only today, it will not be a burden at all. And you will not push things off, saying "I'll start tomorrow. Tomorrow I will pray with strength and kavannah," etc. Because a person has nothing in this world except the day and the hour in which we stand now. For tomorrow is a completely different world. . . (Likkutei Etzot, Yirah v'Avodah #16; see Likkutei Moharan 272).

Yesterday and tomorrow are a person's downfall. Today you may be pulled toward God. But yesterday and tomorrow pull you back. No matter where we stand, we suffer reverses. The one who dwells on yesterday and tomorrow will surely fall away. "Repent one day before your death." "Before your death" is your entire life. During your entire lifetime, you may only be worthy of one day of repentance. . . . Forget about yesterday and tomorrow. This one day is everything (Siḥot Moharan, #288).

What is he saying? First, if we're going to make changes in our lives, and in our beings, we do actually have to start. *Hayom* -- do it today. Don't waste energy focusing on what you didn't do yesterday, just begin today. Don't be demoralized and discouraged by what you've been unable to change until now. Just start. But take comfort in this: that's really all we have to do -- start. We don't have to worry about finishing, we don't have to be overwhelmed by thinking of the rest

of our lives. Just do it now, today. In every “now,” every day And if, as might be expected, we find ourselves back in old patterns tomorrow -- then tomorrow will be the new today. Start again.

This is one of the key differences between Rosh Hashanah and New Year’s Eve. We don’t make “new year’s resolutions,” violate them on January 2 (maybe January 3), and then get discouraged and give up. Actually, we don’t make *resolutions* at all. Instead, we do the *work* of teshuvah, which is a continual process of changing, regressing, and starting over.

אי אפשר לזכות לעבודת ה' כי אם כשיתחיל בכל פעם מחדש. ולפעמים צריכין כמה התחלות  
אפלו ביום אחד.

It is not possible to serve God except by constantly making new beginnings.  
Sometimes, one needs to make many new starts even in a single day (Likkutei  
Etzot, Yirah v'Avodah #36).

*Hayom Harat Olam* -- “today the world is born.” Today we are born, anew.

But now we have what seems to be a problem. How do we square the emphasis on today and only today, on everything being created each day, with another prominent theme of Rosh Hashanah: memory? Just a moment ago we recited *Kiddush*, sanctifying Rosh Hashanah as *Yom HaZikkaron* -- the day of remembering, the day of memory. Tomorrow we will recite a special section of the musaf Amidah, *Zikhronot*, “verses of memory.” We are a people of memory. We are commanded to remember (*zakhor*) most famously in the Ten Commandments, *zakhor et haShabbat*. Are we really to live only in today? What about the past? Isn’t continuity and tradition important? Yes, of course. It’s not that the past has no place. We remember both our personal and communal history and learn from that history, and certainly that review and learning is part of the process of *teshuvah*.

So why does Rav Nachman put so much emphasis on today and on renewal, as he does throughout his writings? One very practical reason is that for most of us, continuity, repetition, habit, fidelity to the past, tends to be more our default. Mostly, we don’t have to struggle to keep doing what we’ve been doing, to keep staying the same, to be who we’ve always been; that happens pretty much on its own. Staying in the present, on the other hand, and beginnings and renewal, require particular effort and energy; they won’t happen on their own. So as a practical matter, we’re much better off focusing our energy there. As Nachman says:

עקר כל הדברים הן ההתחלה, כי כל התחלות קשות, מחמת שיוצא מהפך אל הפך, אבל אחר  
ההתחלה הוא נכנס מעט בהרגל ואין קשה עליו כל כך. ועל כן העבודה והיראה של האדם בכל  
יום הוא כפי ההתחלה. . . . על כן צריך להתחזק לעורר לבו להתחיל בכל פעם מחדש בכח  
התלהבות גדול ובהתגברות חדש לעבודתו יתברך, כאלו לא התחיל עדין מעולם, כדי שתהיה  
עבודתו כראוי כפי כח ההתחלה, כנזכר לעיל. . . .

All beginnings are difficult, because you are trying to turn things from one direction to the opposite direction. But once a beginning has been made, you begin to get used to the direction you are going in and things are no longer so hard. . . . Therefore you must marshal all your strength and steel yourself to make a vigorous beginning. Start again every time with new fire and passion for God. Start as if you had never begun at all before. . . (Likkutei Etzot, Yirah v'Avodah #13; see Likkutei Moharan 62).

But more importantly, as individuals and as a people, the past can be a trap. And that is perhaps nowhere truer than in our work of teshuvah. Many of us get stuck in our pasts, and

never move forward to the work of actually changing. Either, as I mentioned earlier, because we get discouraged by our past efforts to change, or because we confuse regret with real change. "As long as I do my *al hetts*, and beat my chest for my transgressions, and feel really bad about them," we may consciously or unconsciously say to ourselves, "that's enough." No, actually, it isn't. Reviewing our past actually has a very limited function in the work of teshuvah:

אף על פי שצריכין לשמר הזכרון לענין תורה ועבודת ה'. אבל יש גם מעלות בהשכחה, כי צריכין להרגיל עצמו להשכיח מדעתו כל הדברים, המבלבלים את האדם מעבודתו יתברך ובפרט בשעת התפלה, שכל הבלבולים באים אז. ועל פי רב מבלבל אותו מה שעבר, שלא טוב עשה בענין זה ובענין זה וכו'. על כן צריכין להרגיל עצמו שתכף ומיד שחולף ועובר הדבר, יעבר ויסלק אותו מדעתו לגמרי, ויסיח דעתו מזה לגמרי ולא יתחיל לחשב עוד במחשבתו בענין זה כלל, ובפרט בשעת התפלה. וכן כל דאגת העוונות שעבר וכל הפגמים שפגם, הכל צריך להעבירם ולהשכיחם מדעתו בשעת התפלה והעבודה. ואפלו בכל היום כולו אין טוב שיחשב בהם, רק בשעה מיוחדת שרוצה בכונה לשבר לבו ולפרש שיחתו וכו', שאז דיקא יזכיר עצמו כל מה שעבר. אבל בשאר היום צריך להשכיחם מדעתו, כדי שיוכל לעסק בעבודת ה' בשמחה, ובפרט בשעת התפלה. . .

When it comes to Torah and serving God, you must guard your memory carefully. But still, forgetfulness does have its advantages. . . . There is nothing much to be gained from thinking about [past transgressions and other mistakes] any time of the day except in the special time you set aside for meditation. This is the time to be heartbroken and to express all your thoughts before God. You should think about everything you did wrong. But for the rest of the day you should forget about these things completely. Simply serve God with joy. . . (Likkutei Etzot, Zikkaron, #9; Wisdom 26).

The idea is to set aside a specific time for reviewing the past, then just move on and be different. Why? Because the essence of *teshuvah* -- the essence of the service of God -- lies neither in confronting the past nor in fidelity to the past, but in embracing the transformative potential of each moment. *Unetanneh tokef kedushat hayom* -- "let us speak of the sacred power of this day." And what is the day's sacred power? Precisely this: that today, each day, all things are created anew. So, although today is *Yom HaZikkaron* -- the day of memory -- what we are supposed to remember is actually not the past. The verses of *zikhronot* which we recite speak primarily of God's "remembering" the various covenants with us; it's a remembrance, so to speak, of an ongoing commitment for the future. For us too, what we are commanded to remember are primarily transformative experiences and practices: the exodus from Egypt, Shabbat, Sinai.

Rav Nachman writes extensively about the notion of memory, but very little about the past. What is a good memory? He defines it as the ability to retain in our consciousness at all times the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, "remembering" why we're here, what our mission is. It's about remembering that it is never too late to begin, and that every day is filled with an infinite number of opportunities for renewal. Because forgetting this, he says, is "death to the heart."

For those of us who can't remember where we left our glasses or our keys, it may be comforting to think that the most important kind of memory isn't about remembering yesterday, or those details at all. But halavai we should be as disturbed by our forgetting our purpose, our Creator, and our creative potential, as we are when we forget our keys. If we forget where we put our keys or our wallets we run around like crazy looking until we find them. If we forget the meaning and purpose of our existence, mostly we just go right on without it. Many of us are familiar with the experience of going into a room to do something and then forgetting why we're there. Some of us live our lives that way.

To have a good memory is to engage in a continual process of *teshuvah* -- not in the sense of reviewing past deeds, but in the sense of returning one's consciousness to essential values, to transformative potential, to continual renewal, at every moment. On Rosh Hashanah, Yom HaZikaron, the key task is to remember that today, the world and we are born anew. It is to remember who we aspire to be.

וטוב שיאמר האדם בשעת התבודדות היום אני מתחיל להתדבק בך. ויעשה בכל פעם התחלה, כי כל ההמשכות הולכין אחר ההתחלות. וכמו שאומרים שההתחלה היא כמו חצי דבר של כל המעשה. נמצא ממה נפשך, יעשה בכל פעם התחלה ויאמר, כנוזר לעיל. כי ממה נפשך אם מקדם היה טוב, עכשו יהיה יותר טוב, ואם, חס וחלילה, מקדם לא היה טוב, בודאי צריך ומוכרח לעשות התחלה חדשה

When a person is speaking to God, it is a good thing to say: "Today I am just beginning to attach myself to You." You should always make a fresh start, because everything is greatly influenced by the way you start it. In the words of the popular saying, "Starting is half the battle," and this way you can never lose. If things were going well before, now they will go even better. And if God forbid they were not going well before, then in any case you would have had to make a new start! (Likkutei Etzot, Hitbodedut, #18; see Siḥot HaRaN #234).

We'll start there tomorrow.

## ROSH HASHANAH #2 – BEGINNING ANEW

Last night, as we began our journey together, I introduced us to Rav Nachman of Bratslav. Born in the Ukraine, in 1772, Rav Nachman became one of the greatest and most influential teachers in Jewish history. A descendant of both the Maharal of Prague and the Baal Shem Tov, he himself began attracting disciples while still in his teens. And although he died very young (at 38), his impact on the Jewish tradition was enormous and far-reaching. His influence extends across the spectrum of denominations and belief -- from the most radically creative Jewish renewalists, to an entire branch of ḥasidism, to his being quoted extensively in the new High Holy Day machzor being published by our own movement -- Nachman is studied and quoted and lived and sung by Jews everywhere, and his teachings will be the basis of our learning on these Yamim Noraim.

We spoke last night about *teshuvah*, often translated as repentance, and refers to the work of doing an accounting of soul (*heshbon hanefesh*). Both the specific work of determining what apologies we owe to whom and making them, making amends for our wrongdoing, and the more general sense of repairing our character and qualities. It also means to return -- to a truer, more authentic path, or a true more authentic self -- and to respond, specifically to the Divine demand. And we spoke about the particular importance of not allowing the past or the future to deter us from the work of doing teshuvah today. We need to just start, focused only on today, being neither demoralized by the number of times we may have started and failed in the past, nor daunted by the prospect of a whole lifetime of what right now feels like difficult and foreign new ways of being.

There is a necessary corollary of what we said last night, and it is this:

כי צריך רק להתחדש בכל יום להתחיל בכל עת מחדש.

A person needs to renew one's self every day, to begin anew at every moment (Sihot Haran 51).

אי אפשר ליכות לעבודת ה' כי אם כשיתחיל בכל פעם מחדש. ולפעמים צריך כמה התחלות אפלו ביום אחד.

It is not possible to serve God except by constantly making new beginnings. Sometimes, one needs to make many new starts even in a single day (Likkutei Etzot, Yirah v'Avodah #36).

That's how teshuvah works. We start on a path of transformation and change. We regress. We begin again.

But Nachman's injunction to continually begin anew isn't only about starting over when we fail, or when we find ourselves reverting to old behaviors. "Beginning anew" isn't only practical advice for the process of teshuvah; it is also itself the content, one of the goals. What Nachman is saying is that we should become people who are always beginning, always renewing.

In Hebrew, we have the expression "baal teshuvah." It is an idiom that refers to those who are newly observant, who have begun or returned to a serious engagement with Judaism. But taking it out of its idiomatic usage, literally, it means "master of teshuvah." In other words, someone who has become an expert at the art of continually returning/repenting, continually renewing, continually recreating one's self. A *baal teshuvah* in this sense is someone who continually sees him or herself as a beginner -- a beginner at understanding, at serving, at life; someone for whom that has itself become a way of life.

Why is this desirable? For one thing, experience and expertise, while certainly valuable, can also have some dangerous side effects. One danger is arrogance; beginning anew every day helps keep us humble. Why does every tractate of the Talmud begin on *amud bet*, page 2? As a reminder that no matter what we think we know, we should always be aware that we haven't even gotten to page one, that we haven't even really started. Another danger expertise and past experience is a kind of blindness. When we are expert, we see only what we expect to see, what we're used to seeing, what we've seen before. A practice of beginning anew every day, several times a day enables us to really see the world, which itself is created anew, every day.

And beginning anew is good for us for another reason. Perhaps counterintuitively, beginning anew as a life position, a way of being, is the best response to a rapidly changing and increasingly stressful world.

We are living in stressful times -- more stressful than most? I don't know. With all of our difficulties, we have a tremendous amount to be grateful for; our lives are filled with blessings that our forebears could never even have imagined. But certainly the economy has caused many of us significant hardship. And even if we are blessed not to be in immediate personal financial crisis, I think all of us feel more concerned about the future, and more vulnerable. Moreover, society is changing rapidly, as is the Jewish world. Many of the forms, institutions and ways of being that we have always taken for granted are being called into question. We live in a world in which email is already passe. And voicemail messages? Forget it.

Where do we find comfort? It is a natural human tendency to stick to what we know, and it turns out there's a physiological basis for this. You may have seen the article in the science section of the New York Times a few weeks ago on the impact of stress on the brain. The article reported on research concluding that stress shrinks the brain's capacity for newness, and makes it harder for us to be creative. It seems that when times are tough, we're hardwired to engage in habitual behaviors.

So it's not surprising that when we are under stress -- when we are frightened, or suffering a loss -- we would cling to the familiar. And there's nothing necessarily so terrible about that, in moderation. We all need anchors and stability.

The problem is that that response also keeps us stuck in habitual behaviors which often serve us very badly. We keep doing the same things we've always done, even though they're not helpful anymore. And, as the New York Times article pointed out, that results in more stress. Robert Sapolsky, a Stanford University neurobiologist quoted in the article, put it this way:

This is a great model for understanding why we end up in a rut, and then dig ourselves deeper and deeper into that rut. The truth is we're lousy at recognizing when our normal coping mechanisms aren't working. Our response is usually to do it five times more, instead of thinking, maybe it's time to try something new.

What's the remedy? Interestingly, when the article speaks about relief from stress, it speaks about the importance of rest. We call it Shabbat, and I recommend it highly. *Shavat vayinafash* -- God rested and "ensouled." Shabbat is precisely about reclaiming parts of ourselves -- often the most vital, creative parts of us -- that get sacrificed all week on the altar of stress. It is about reclaiming our soul.

But in addition to Shabbat, if we're going to counter our natural, hard-wired tendency to keep

ourselves locked in this stress loop, we have to become better practiced at thinking creatively, at finding new solutions, new approaches, new ways of being. We have to exercise the part of ourselves that can keep us intellectually, emotionally, spiritually limber. And 300 years before the scientific research on the brain, Rav Nachman proposed a practice of continually, always, beginning anew.

Think about the nature of much of human suffering -- pain, anxiety, loss, fear. Whether we are talking about the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, illness, or the end of a relationship. Whether we're moving or watching our neighborhood change, or our children leave home, or feeling left behind by technology that becomes outdated before we've even heard of it. Or whether we're seeing changes in ourselves -- as a result of aging, or of learning. A good percentage of the time, suffering arises in connection with the need, or the anticipated need, to accommodate to a new reality. To learn to live without someone we loved. To learn to live with a body we feel has betrayed us. To learn to live with a revised sense of who we are, how we function, and our place in the world.

Of course, we do have the option of clinging to the trappings of the old as much as possible, and that approach will doubtless yield some measure of comfort. But it will also keep us in pain. Or, we can adapt and change -- a path that may well be more intensely painful for a time, but that will ultimately enable us to live more fully, more joyfully, more deeply. And that's a different, deeper comfort; that is healing instead of amelioration of pain.

During this past year, I wrote a series of columns for our bulletin on finding comfort in difficult times. When we speak of the comforts of religion, many of us automatically assume that religion comforts us by providing familiarity and routine. And it does. There is a role for stability, and even nostalgia, in making us feel safe. That is, for example, part of the healing power of the mourner's kaddish. There is nothing wrong with that. And as we said last night, there is a role for tradition and for memory.

The problem arises when religion is grounded exclusively, or even primarily, in the comforts of nostalgia and fidelity to the past. Because religion that offers only that kind of comfort is a profoundly impoverished religion: it's like a life preserver with no rope attached. It may keep us afloat for a brief period of time, but it won't get us back to solid ground. A healthy and authentic religious life doesn't allow us to indefinitely indulge the illusion of unchanging stability, however much we may yearn for it. Nor does it allow us -- even while affirming the inherent value and dignity of each individual -- to indulge the illusion that we're just fine, the problem's out there, and we don't need to change. Instead, it helps us meet life's challenges by challenging us to grow, to change, to aspire higher, and to become practiced at adaptation; it offers us the deep healing power of learning, beginning and renewal.

Which is why perhaps the greatest source of comfort that Judaism has to offer is teshuvah. Is teshuvah a challenge, the difficult work of repair? Yes. It is also an opportunity, and a profound expression of hope and faith -- faith in the possibility of beginning again, of continual renewal, every day. Because really, continual renewal and beginning again, being a *baal teshuvah*, isn't merely good for us; it is of the essence of who we are. It is, Nachman teaches, the only way to fulfill our human potential, the only way to really be alive.

We are praying, these days -- several times a day -- to be inscribed in the Book of Life. We spoke last Shabbat about the Torah's command to choose life, and the beautiful interpretation of the Netivot Shalom that inscription in the book of life is handed over to us as a matter for our choice. Here is Rav Nachman:

קדם התשובה עדין אין לו הויה, כאלו עדין לא נתהוה בעולם, כי טוב לו שלא נברא משנברא.  
וכשבא לטהר את עצמו לעשות תשובה, אז מכין את עצמו שיהיה לו הויה בעולם, על כן תשובה  
היא בחינת אהיה, הינו אנא זמין למהוי:

Before a person does teshuvah, he has no existence, as if he has not yet been brought into the world. Because it would have been better for him not to have been created at all. But when he comes and purifies himself to do teshuvah, then he prepares himself to become a being in the world. Therefore, teshuvah is in the aspect of the name, "Ehyeh," that is, "I intend (or I am prepared), to be [to become]" (Likkutei Etzot, Teshuvah, 4; see also Likkutei Moharan 6:2).

Nachman is playing on a name of God, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, revealed to Moshe at the burning bush. God "self-identifies" (so to speak) as continual becoming, rather than static being. *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*: not "I am Who I am," but "I will be Who I will be." Nachman takes this notion of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* as a model for us. Our existence, our lives, are predicated on our commitment to continually becoming, through continual *teshuvah* and beginning anew at each moment. It is partly about living each moment in the moment: taking responsibility for choosing, "who will I be now?," and making that choice with care and intention (*kavannah*). And it is partly a way of saying that we are only really alive when we are beginning anew. The moment we say "I am," we might as well say, "I was." Only by committing to "I will be", to continually becoming, do we really live.

By analogy, think about the human body. At the cellular level, a healthy human body is always dying and being born at the same time. What would happen if the body decided it wasn't going to renew, even for a brief time? The same is true of our hearts and minds and souls and personalities and relationships and ways of being in the world. We are always living and dying, at one and the same time. We can't stop the dying part; a moment comes and goes, and what was, who we were, is gone. But we can counter our constant death by continually being reborn, again and again and again. If we don't -- if we try to stay the same -- the price will be very high. Because what we will be left with is the process of dying. Eventually we will have become phantom selves -- ghosts of who we were yesterday. Perhaps this is why the Baal Shem Tov reads *al tashlikheinu l'et ziknah* not as "do not cast me away when I am old," but as "do not cast me away into oldness, into staleness and an incapacity to renew and change. Or as the article in the Times concluded, "the only difference between a rut and a grave are the dimensions."

Now of course, living this way isn't easy. It puts the responsibility for own being squarely on ourselves. We have a personal and communal history, to be sure, but we can't blame our history or society or our childhoods (or yesterday) for who we are today; because today -- each day -- we have the opportunity and responsibility to create ourselves anew.

And it is a responsibility not only to ourselves. Earlier I spoke about the dangers of familiarity and expertise -- that it can engender a kind of blindness, we see only what expect to see. That applies to how we see other people too. So often we don't see people as they really are. We see what we expect to see; we see who they were. When we become practiced *baalei teshuvah*, people who continually begin again, we become better at seeing each other anew; we begin to see other people as they are now, not as they used to be. We also become better at allowing other people to begin again, to try new ways of being, to learn and grow and change. And once we start on this path, we begin to realize how many second chances and "do overs" we ourselves need in life -- every day-- and what a blessing it is to be able to start fresh. So how can we -- how dare we! -- be stingy in offering the same opportunity to others?

If one of the greatest gifts that religion can offer is the spiritual/emotional/intellectual limberness that comes from accepting the challenge of *teshuvah*, then for religion to fulfill its function -- for a synagogue to be what it's supposed to be -- we have to create communities in which it's safe, even expected, to be a beginner. Communities in which it's safe to make a mistake and try again, to start over, to reinvent ourselves, again and again and again.

I spoke earlier about the humility that comes from a practice of beginning anew. That experience of being humbled is one of the main reasons why we don't do it. Being a beginner makes us feel vulnerable, exposed -- whether we're talking about learning new information, a new skill, or a new way to be. But avoiding that vulnerability by sticking with what we know and who we were is devastating to the life of the spirit.

Prayer is a perfect example. It is impossible to pray unless one is willing to risk feeling like a beginner. Why? On the one hand, if we think that we don't know enough -- if the Hebrew and the prayerbook and Jewish ritual feels foreign -- then if we can't bear to feel like a beginner, we'll simply never approach; we'll never really try. On the other hand, if we think we know a lot, and the prayerbook is too familiar, then we have other problems. Unless we approach it anew, as a beginner, our prayer risks becoming mechanized, a rote repetition of the same old same old. We encounter nothing new, neither within the Divine nor within ourselves. Worse yet, it can become a source of pride; we come to synagogue primarily to revel in our competence, rather than to serve God.

And prayer, of course, is just one example. Once we become *baalei teshuvah* -- masters of renewal -- everything becomes more fluid, more open, more authentic. How different things would be if we could create a community of beginners! Imagine a culture which valued how much we learn and grow, rather than how much we know? Imagine how much less anxious and afraid and self-protective we would be, if we knew that we would be given a fresh start every day, allowed to be different than we were, seen for who we are in this moment. If we knew that trying and failing and trying again would be applauded. We wouldn't have to play it safe and not try, or wait until we thought we could do it perfectly. We wouldn't feel threatened by something we don't already know; we'd see it as an opportunity to learn. We wouldn't waste precious time in regret. How much more vibrant would we be, as individuals, as a community, in our personal relationships! And when the world changes -- or when God forbid life presents us with painful losses -- at least the process of beginning anew would be comfortingly familiar, and at least we would know that we're not alone.

A person needs to renew one's self every day, to begin anew at every moment. .  
. . It is not possible to serve God except by constantly making new beginnings.

Hayom harat olam. Today -- everyday -- the world -- and we -- are born.

## ROSH HASHANAH #3 – BEING AND PURPOSE

There is a rabbinic tradition that the world is created on Rosh Hashanah. And so we pray, *hayom harat olam*, “today the world is born.” But according to many of the rabbis, Rosh Hashanah marks not the first day of creation, but the sixth, that is, the day the human being is created. So why do we say “today the world is born,” if in fact, this is day six? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say, “today *humanity* is born”?

Perhaps an answer can be found in this passage from the Mishnah:

כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם.

Every single person is obligated to say: the world was created for my sake (Sanhedrin 37a).

The world, it seems, is created for the sake of the human being. So all anthropocentrism aside, we learn that without us, creation has no purpose. And if so, then it makes sense that we say *hayom harat olam*, today the world is born, because today the *purpose* of the world (i.e., humanity) is born. In other words, the subtle message of the liturgy is that purpose creates existence, purpose makes it real. Creation doesn’t really exist until the *reason* for creation exists.

Ah, but then, the same is true of us. Are we created today? Yes, but only to the extent that we recognize and acknowledge that there is a reason, a purpose, for our being created.

And what is that reason, what is the purpose of human life? In the most general sense, our tradition teaches, humanity is created to reveal the Divine. And we do that by our own awareness of God, and by living in such a way that other people may come to be aware of God through us. That’s a large part of what we mean when we speak of “crowning God as Sovereign” on Rosh Hashanah. It means, certainly, acknowledging God as all powerful, and coming to terms with the fact that God, not we, are in control. But more than that, it means re-committing to our primary task in life: i.e., to become more aware of the Divine, and then to transform ourselves so that everything we do, say, and think -- just who we *are* -- brings God’s presence into the world.

That’s it. Simple as that. I figured I’d start out this morning with some softballs.

But of course, it’s actually not that simple, because we are not Adam. We are not Everyman. Each of us is unique. And that means that it’s not enough to articulate the purpose of humanity in general. There must also be a unique, specific mission for each of us in particular. In fact, in the Mishnah I quoted earlier, it is precisely *because of* the uniqueness of each individual that we are obliged to say that the world was created for me:

ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד - כולן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון - ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם.

For this reason was Adam created alone, . . . To proclaim the greatness of the Holy Blessed One: for if a person strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One, fashioned every human being in the stamp of the first man, and yet not one of them resembles his or her fellow. Therefore every single person is

obliged to say: the world was created for my sake (Sanhedrin 37a).

We have been studying the teachings of Rav Nachman of Bratslav. Here is what he says:

צריך האדם להסתכל מאד על דרכיו ולהסתכל ולהתבונן היטב על כל הסבות והעניינים שהשם יתברך מזמין לו, ומתגלגל עמו בכל יום ויום, כי כל יום ויום, יש בו מחשבה, דבור ומעשה משונה מחברו. וצריך שתדע שהשם יתברך מצמצם אלקותו מאין סוף עד אין תכלית עד נקודות המרכז של עולם הגשמי שהאדם עומד עליו, ומזמין לו לכל אדם מחשבה, דבור ומעשה לפי היום ולפי האדם ולפי המקום, ומלביש לו בהם רמזים כדי לקרבו לעבודתו. בכך צריך האדם להסתכל על כל זה להגדיל דעתו ושכלו להסתכל ולהתבונן על כל המחשבה, דבור ומעשה שהשם יתברך מזמין לו בכל יום ויום, להבין מהם הרמזים שהשם יתברך מרמז לו בהם להתקרב אליו בכל פעם מכל מקום שהוא. כי בכל העניינים ובכל המשא ומתן ובכל הדברים שבעולם שהשם יתברך מזמין לאדם בכל יום ויום, בכלם יש בהם רמזים פרטיים שהוא יתברך מרמז לו לאדם בכל פעם להתקרב אליו. וצריך להגדיל דעתו ולהסתכל על זה היטב (נד, ב):

A person should think about the various situations God sends him or her day by day. Each day has its own thoughts, words and actions. All of them are completely unique to that day.

God has as it were “contracted” God’s Divinity, which is infinite and without end, such that Godliness is present even in the innermost points of the finite, material world in which we find ourselves.

Thus God sends each individual thoughts, words and deeds appropriate to the day, the person and the place. Within them are clothed hints whose purpose is to draw this individual closer to God’s service. A person should therefore pay attention to the various things which happen to him or her, and expand one’s consciousness to reflect on their significance.

We should think about every thought, word and deed which God sends us each day in order to discover the hints God is giving us to draw us closer every moment in every place. This holds true of every single person, no matter who we may be and what situation we are in. For in every matter, including our work and business transactions, everything that happens to a person on a given day, in everything there are particular hints to draw a person closer to God. (Likkutei Etzot, Da’at #36; Likkutei Moharan 54:2)

What does this mean?

First, a caveat. Whenever we speak of God, we are speaking in poetry, not prose. We’re alluding to what are essentially inarticulable realms. And although human language is all we have, sometimes it gets in the way. So when we say that “God creates a world just for you,” or “God sends hints,” we don’t necessarily need to envision an anthropomorphized God sitting on a throne directing everything. One can of course hold that theology, but it’s not the only way to understand Nachman’s teaching. And if the word “God” is a barrier for you, conjuring only those anthropomorphic images which are not consonant with your beliefs, then do the necessary translation for yourself. Substitute terms which reflect your theology -- perhaps, for example, “forces of goodness,” or “transformative or redemptive energy” -- whatever language points, for you, to the realm of the transcendent.

Now back to Rav Nachman. I believe that what he is saying is that the potential for holiness (or as we sometimes say, Divine or holy sparks) inheres in all things. And that holiness can only become manifest, the Divine spark can only be elevated and revealed, through the agency of a human being. Moreover, what is required is not just a human being in general, but a particular

human being; each one of us has a unique role in that process at each moment, in every place, with respect to every thing.

And, Nachman suggests, this works two ways. In everything I encounter, I have the ability to reveal an aspect of the Divine, that no one else in the history of the created world can reveal. At the same time, that very thing that I am able to reveal, is crucial for me; there is something I need to learn, some way in which I need to grow, to raise *myself* ever so slightly closer to God.

I'll give you a concrete, albeit sort of simplistic, example of this. We have a table downstairs. In one moment David Rosenberg sits at that table to teach *haftarah*. In another moment Sandy Kopell uses that same table to make *mishloah manot* for Purim. What Nachman is saying is that it's not the same table for David and for Sandy. In the moment that David used it to teach *haftarah*, the table was created for him -- by him -- to reveal one aspect of God. And when Sandy made *mishloah manot*, the table was created for her -- by her -- to reveal a different spark of holiness. Moreover, the table contained (in Nachman's language) hints for each of them. David learned one thing doing his mitzvah, Sandy another doing hers. Each was transformed, elevated, in some small way, differently, uniquely.

And that's just an example. Not just the table, but everything we encounter -- things, people, places, circumstances, events, moments -- are created for and by us, uniquely.

And it is in this sense, according to Nachman, that we are obligated to say, כָּל הָעוֹלָם לֹא נִבְרָא אֶלָּא בְּשִׁבְלִי, "the whole world was created only for my sake." The whole world was created unique for me in every moment, because each thing in each moment is an opportunity for me -- an opportunity to learn and grow, to repair something in myself that needs repair, to master the lessons my soul needs to master, and do a better job of revealing some aspect of holiness, of God, through my very being.

In a very real sense, then, each of us is in our own world. If nothing is real unless it has a purpose, then we're missing the point if we keep trying to nail down some objective reality out there. Rather, we *create* reality through our interaction with it, through discovering and revealing the purpose and meaning in each thing. And perhaps that's why don't say *hayom harat ha-olam*, the world is created today, but *hayom harat olam* -- a world, is created today. Or, as Rav Nachman says, "It should never enter one's one's mind, God forbid, that there is only one world..." (Likkutei Moharan 54:1).

Which brings us to a second caveat. Please understand that I am not suggesting that God *sends* suffering to us so *that* we will learn particular lessons. What I'm saying is that *when* we encounter something, even suffering, there is always a potential within it for us to learn; there is always something unique only we can draw from it.

Today -- every day -- a world is created. A world created as a spiritual curriculum just for you, and the key to the whole thing is (1) to remember that that's the goal -- that we're here to grow and learn and elevate the sparks -- to remember to view the world through that lens and (2) to get better at figuring out what the lessons and hints are, so that we can learn them.

So what are the implications of this?

The first, and most obvious implication, is the extraordinary inestimable value of the self. At every moment -- especially if we feel hopeless, helpless, useless, down on ourselves, if we feel what we do or we ourselves don't matter -- we are obligated to say: כָּל הָעוֹלָם לֹא נִבְרָא אֶלָּא

בְּשִׁבְלִי, “the whole world was created only for me.” If we had no purpose, if we were not irreplaceable, we would not have been created. And if we had no purpose now, we would no longer be alive. In fact, when we speak about faith, we’re speaking not only about faith in God, but also about faith in the human enterprise, and faith in one’s self in particular. Nor should this faith in ourselves, this recognition of the inestimable value of the human being, be confused with either arrogance or with a sense of entitlement. Not at all. This sense of the value of the human being is grounded in humility, in purpose, mission and responsibility; it focuses us not on what we think we’re entitled to receive, but on what we know we are obligated to contribute.

Which brings us to the second implication of Nachman’s teaching: responsibility. He says:

כִּי צָרִיךְ כָּל אָדָם לֹמַר: כָּל הָעוֹלָם לֹא נִבְרָא אֶלָּא בְּשִׁבְלִי (סִנְהֶדְרִין לו.). נִמְצָא כְּשֶׁהָעוֹלָם נִבְרָא בְּשִׁבְלִי, צָרִיךְ אֲנִי לְרַאוֹת וּלְעֵן בְּכָל עֵת בְּתַקּוּן הָעוֹלָם. וּלְמַלְאוֹת הַסְּרוּן הָעוֹלָם, וּלְהַתְפַּלֵּל בְּעִבְרָם:

Each person must say: The entire world was created only for me. Therefore, since the world was created for me, I must look deeply, and probe at all times how to repair the world, and to seek to meet the needs of the world, and to pray about them. (Likkutei Moharan 5:1).

Therefore, Nachman says, I need to be fully conscious as I move through the world, looking for opportunities to make a difference, to learn, and to elevate the sparks in every thing I encounter. (see Likkutei Moharan 94).

And of course, this way of thinking has profound implications in how we treat others. The world is created for me, yes. But guess what? The world is created for you, too. If I am of inestimable value, then so is everyone else. And if the world is created for me -- if everything I encounter is a spiritual curriculum -- that means that everyone I meet is my teacher, and my first question should be, “what can I learn?”

It also means we need to approach each other with profound humility, being extremely cautious about judging each other, especially comparing others to ourselves. Why? Because the people I meet are *literally* experiencing a different world, a different reality, and the hints they need to receive, the lessons they need to learn, their work of *tikkun atzmi* (repair of self) and *tikkun olam* (repair of world) is entirely different from mine. We need to see all people not only as teachers, but as fellow learners, each with his or her own curriculum, own task. A task that may be in such a different realm (“*has v’shalom* it should enter your mind that there is only one world!”), that you don’t have a clue. So when we catch ourselves saying, “I do this particular thing (give money, volunteer, whatever), why can’t he?” Or, “I’m this way (generous, kind, open, whatever), why isn’t she?” We should stop and think of the absurdity of it. We might as well say, “Why is she taking calculus? I already know calculus!”

So how do we learn, how do we train our consciousness, learn to read life’s hints, and discern our particular purpose? Generally, that’s what Jewish life and Jewish observance is about -- training in that. But here are some specifics.

First, Nachman recommends the regular practice of hitbodedut (secluding yourself and speaking aloud, in your own words, to God), and quiet contemplation:

צָרִיךְ לִזְהוּ זְכוּיָה גְדוּלָה שִׁיזְכָּה לִישֵׁב עִצְמוֹ שְׁעָה אַחַת בַּיּוֹם, וְשִׁיחִיָּה לוֹ חֲרֻטָּה עַל מַה שְּׁצָרִיכִין לְהַתְחַרֵּט, כִּי לֹא כָל אָדָם זֹכֵה לִישׁוֹב הַדְּעָת. עַל כֵּן צָרִיכִין לְהַתְגַּבֵּר מְאֹד לְרַאוֹת לִישׁוֹב עִצְמוֹ הַיֵּטֵב עַל כָּל מַעֲשָׂיו וְהַנְּהוּגוֹתָיו. אִם כֵּךְ רָאוּי לוֹ לְבַלּוֹת יָמָיו בְּמַעֲשִׂים כְּאֵלוֹ:

The days pass and are gone, and one finds that he never once had time to really think. You must make sure you set aside a time each day when you can reflect calmly on everything you are doing and the way you are behaving and ask if this is the right way to spend your days. (Likkutei Etzot, Da'at, #54; see Wisdom 47).

Second, to get better at figuring out our mission, we need to focus particularly on the obstacles in our path, and the areas in our lives which present us with the greatest challenges:

אותו הדבר שמתגבר ביותר על האדם, אותו הדבר דיקא הוא צריך לשבר בשביל השם יתברך כי זה עקר עבודתו, וזה בחינת מסירת נפש. ומי שהוא מתפחד מאד מהמיתה, הוא דיקא צריך ביותר לקבל על עצמו למסר נפשו על קדוש השם

Each person has something which is more of an obstacle for him than anything else. That very thing is precisely the barrier which he must break for the sake of God. This is the core of his or her service, and it is a form of sacrificing oneself. (Likkutei Etzot, Kedushah #8; Sihot Moharan #57).

What is most difficult for you? Where are you most resistant? What barriers do you have the hardest time pushing through? Where do you most frequently feel that you have failed? Wherever you find yourself really struggling, really doubting yourself, chances are that's a good place to start looking for hints.

The analogy that works best for me in this area relates to skiing. If we start to lose control skiing down a mountain, our natural instinct is often to lean back, resisting the pull of gravity and drawing away from the direction of our anticipated fall. In fact, that's exactly wrong. The way to gain control, is to lean forward, into the turn, down the mountain. Here too, we need to lean *into* our challenges, *into* our anxieties and fears, rather than pulling away.

Third, and related to this, we need to become our own teachers. Remember that Rav Nachman said that not only is there something to be learned from all that we encounter, but also from our own thoughts, words and deeds. So we need to develop our self-awareness, to listen to our own thoughts and words as potential messages to ourselves, rather than simply reacting to them, judging them, or acting on them.

Our experience of these High Holy Days is a perfect example. What happens in this room -- what makes it real -- is the same process I described earlier with the table. We have the *machzor* and all the liturgy, we have the room with everyone in it, and Marcos and I davening and teaching in the particular ways we do. But the experience becomes real -- it is created -- uniquely and differently by and for each person here. *Kol ha-olam lo nivra ela bishvili* -- this whole thing is just for you. Why are you here, now? What is it you need, that this moment can offer? What is your contribution? I don't know. Only you know. Somewhere inside you, some part of you knows.

So listen to yourself, and listen to your responses. If you are moved, if you are bored, if you are uplifted or disappointed, drawn in or alienated, if something makes you joyful or sad or angry or hopeful -- each of us needs to ask, "Why am I responding this way? What thoughts and feelings come up for me, and why? What can I do with that? What can I learn? What can I teach? What can I teach myself? How can I find God's holiness in my own response? This is, actually, one of the central functions of prayer. When we pray, the point is not simply to rush through a lot of words. Nor is prayer only about communicating with God. Part of the purpose of prayer is

to communicate with ourselves; to listen to our own *response* to the words, and what those responses reveal about who we are and what we are meant to do.

Finally, and most importantly, study Torah. Obviously, we study Torah for the substance of the Torah, which sensitizes our hearts, minds and souls to be more aware of what we need to learn and what we need to do. Torah teaches us values, ethics, and ultimate meaning. It focuses and elevates our consciousness. It challenges us to think and grow.

But not only that. For one thing, we don't study Torah alone; we study with other people. And Torah study takes us to depths in relationships that it's hard to reach through other means. We study, we talk about ultimate values, about the meaning of life, about our beliefs and our doubts and our challenges. Speaking personally, this is what drew me into Jewish life and observance. And very often, when I study, someone else says something that is exactly what I need to hear at that moment; someone says precisely what I need to learn, often sometimes seemingly unrelated to the text.

And not only that. Rav Nachman says:

על ידי עסק התורה יכול ליכות להבין הרמזים מכל הדברים שבעולם להתקרב על ידם לשם  
יתברך, ואפלו במקום חשך ואפל שנדמה לכאורה ששם קשה להתקרב לשם יתברך, גם שם יאיר  
לו הושכל האמת למצא גם שם את השם יתברך ולהתקרב משם דיקא לשם יתברך (שם):  
If you labor in the study of Torah you will be able to understand the hints and  
meanings contained in all the different things in the world and use them as a  
means of coming closer to God. Even if you find yourself in a place of darkness  
where you might think it hard to draw close to God, true wisdom will radiate to  
you and you will be able to draw close to God even from there (Likkutei Etzot,  
Talmud Torah #3; Likkutei Moharan 1:1).

The way we read Torah is training in how to read life. It teaches us to make fine distinctions, to look closely and see beneath the surface. When we study we learn how to tolerate ambiguity, how to read the same text on many levels, and to understand that each word opens innumerable worlds of meanings. "Never let it enter your mind, God forbid, that there is only one world."

A Torah scroll contains only consonants, no vowels. It is unvocalized, mute, without a human being. It exists, becomes real, only when the human being gives voice to it -- literally and of course symbolically. That is the model for life. Our task is to put the *nekudot* (vowels) into the consonants of life -- to give voice to the holiness within, to read life's events in such a way that they convey meaning, that they convey holiness, and that all of reality speaks the Divine.

*Hayom harat olam* -- for a world is created today. ובשבילי נברא העולם. - and that world is created for me.