

Kol Nefesh ★ Yom Kippur 2021 ★ 5782

Cheshbon Hanefesh - Soul Accounting

Did you know that the rabbis of the Talmud (our oral Torah) described Yom Kippur as one of the happiest days of the year? I know that sounds a little strange on the surface...a day when we don't eat or drink and spend all our time praying and asking for forgiveness. Doesn't exactly describe a party. But think about it, after a day of emptying ourselves of all we need to say to each other and to G!d and repenting for all that we did and did not do, we emerge with a truly fresh start. Isn't that something to celebrate? We can fill the spaces we've cleared out in our hearts with joy. I'm imagining cleaning out a favorite bowl, really scrubbing it clean and wiping it dry, and then filling it with warm, delicious soup. I can almost feel that warmth refilling me and bringing me to face this new year with joy.

This new year feels like a challenge for many of us. We have been living under some form of restrictions since the pandemic hit this country 18 months ago. We've spent a lot of time inside our homes and inside our heads and it might feel like introspection and listing our transgressions is the last thing we need right now. Yet here comes Yom Kippur, with all of its challenging liturgy and spiritual demands. Let's acknowledge that it is a lot. A LOT. I have colleagues who joked

that their Yom Kippur sermons would be to stand before the open ark and weep for 10 minutes. That might resonate with you. The impulse to burst into tears over the year we just had as well as the year we have no idea what will be is pretty strong. It is for me. Yet our tradition gives us tools to process our experiences.

Part of the process of Yom Kippur is called Cheshbon Hanefesh. What is Cheshbon Hanefesh? This phrase translates to: Accounting of our souls. Taking stock of all that we said and did in the previous year. Looking at who we are, where we've been, and what we've done. From a place of love; not berating ourselves for all the times we were not good enough. Not putting ourselves on the defensive; we know that only leads to shutting down. How about we examine ourselves without judgement? Let's treat ourselves with the kindness we normally reserve for our dearest friends. And really, if you don't count yourself among your dearest friends, this is going to be a loooong life hanging out with this self whom you cannot shake. So remind yourself that you are *precious*, you are *loved*. And with that kind lens firmly in place, take some time to do your soul accounting.

An important part of this Cheshbon Hanefesh is the focus on our behavior, rather than our worthiness. Our Torah teaches us that we are each inherently worthy, inherently deserving of respect and love. In the very first chapter of Genesis we

learn that human beings are created in the image of G!d - b'tzelem elohim. We talk so much at Kol Nefesh about caring for the stranger because the Torah mentions it 36 times. We remind each other that we are all G!d's children and we should welcome everyone warmly. Yet I'm not sure how often we remind *ourselves* that when we look in the mirror, we are seeing a facet of the Divine. You are a blessing. To your parents, to your friends, to your siblings (on most days), and to the world. While your actions may not have been all that you wished for yourself in this past year, this does not detract from your inherent goodness.

When we take time to look back at the places we missed the mark in the past year, we can feel guilty about those moments. I mean, of course we feel guilt - we're Jews! It's in our DNA! A little guilt can go a long way in motivating us to change our behavior. Researcher and author Brene Brown warns us of the difference between guilt and shame. She says that "guilt can be adaptive and helpful in holding something we've done, or failed to do, up against our values and feeling discomfort." Shame, according to Brown, is "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging - something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection." Shame is not a tool for change; it causes people to feel

trapped, powerless, and isolated. What we really want to feel are empathy, connection, power, and freedom.

So we are going to judge ourselves lovingly. And we will resist any feelings of shame about where we have missed the mark. As we move forward into 5782, what else can we do to strive to be our best selves? If we have patterns that did not work for us last year, can we try to create new patterns? Remember we discussed last week that this is our Shmitah year - our year of release. I hope you've been thinking about what you might release in the new year. Perhaps it is the armor we built around us to protect us, yet it no longer serves us. We may have thought it protected us but instead it keeps us from being who we want to be once we've outgrown it. Could we replace the armor with curiosity? That will help us learn, ask questions, and develop self-awareness. Maybe we won't take off the armor all at once, or maybe we can create a new form of protection for ourselves.

As our summer gardening season nears its end, I'm thinking about the bumper crop of heirloom tomatoes I was blessed with this year. The one thing we did differently (besides not travel for the second summer in a row) was build new tomato cages. Bobby and I learned from a farmer friend how to make our own

cages from livestock fence panels. Bending the panels into tubes makes a sturdy cage with nice, wide openings for the branches and also the gardener's hand to reach in and pick a tomato. These tomato cages provided support without constricting the plant. They support the plant as it grows and flowers and bears fruit. While we are accustomed to seeing cages and barriers as constricting us and our creativity, it seems that well-conceived and constructed support systems can help us reach our goals. Let's figure out what kind of support systems we need to create and nurture to enable us going forward. We have access to so much technology and so many people who love us, it is beyond our ancestors' imagination. We can be here for one another and allow the strength of our community to support us as we do our work.

May 5782 be a year that you spend less time judging and more time supporting and celebrating. There is joy in your soul and all around you. The more we notice it, the more we will see and feel it permeating our world.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May you be sealed for good in the Book of Life.

*(Ended with We Are Loved by Rabbi Shir Yaakov Feit)*