

Rosh HaShanah Morning, delivered in Fredricksburg, VA 2012

Last night, I talked about the power of memory. I spoke of gathering the lights of life and I spoke of introspection and its integral role in propelling us into a bright future.

But what of that introspection? How does it happen? How do we go about doing it? How *exactly*, does one recount one's year in preparation for the High Holidays?

There are stories of Hassidic masters going out to the woods and weeping and crying out to God. Screaming at the top of their lungs of all the things they had done either literally or metaphorically. But, I think that for us here today, that might seem a little out of the ordinary.

Moving in the opposite direction, we could choose to go far off to a retreat, pay for our room and board, and sit in silent contemplation. Occasionally convening to listen to a lecture that directly tells us how to cleanse our bodies, minds, and souls. Removing ourselves from the greater world, with the hope of emerging anew a week or so later. But, this too, seems to be going equally far afield--even if in the other direction.

To be sure, Judaism holds and affirms many paths to holiness. Much of our tradition precisely focuses upon how we might live by the light of God. Our study of Torah. Our system of mitzvot. Our writings, our prayers, our holidays and celebrations all combine to bring us closer to one another and closer to the Divine.

And so, if we so chose, we could indeed go out to the woods for our introspection. We could certainly go on a retreat to look within. We could study Torah, in an effort to find ourselves in the text. And we could pray for our inner selves to be made clear. We have so many, rich, spiritual, and indeed very Jewish ways of remembering and recalling our pasts and who we are.

[pause]

In the 19th century, in European Jewery, there rose a movement known as Mussar. The Mussar movement represented a spiritual, ethical, educational, and cultural awakening that strove toward personal development. It originated as a practice for the solitary seeker. But over the years, grew to become the basis for a greater spiritual movement. Mussar combined the intellectual curiosity and openness brought about by the Enlightenment period of European history. And it grew into what today's Mussar Institute calls, quote: "a

path of contemplative practices and exercises that have evolved {...} to help an individual soul to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives.”

During this season, our time of high holidays and a month long period of introspection, there is perhaps no better time to engage some Mussar practices. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, would, each year, write what he called a Cheshbon Hanefesh--an accounting of the soul.

He would take some time during the month of Elul--the very month we find ourselves in now--and he would look back. He would recall how his year had progressed. He would introspect and examine the things that he had done and said. And he would write them down--creating a list, an accounting of his life and of all he was over the past year.

This writing of a Cheshbon Hanefesh has gained a good measure of popularity, widespread among Jews today--across denominations. And indeed, there are many ways of going about it and many ways to craft an accounting of the soul.

Remembering and recalling their past year, some people make two columns. One column outlines things that they achieved, accomplished, or are otherwise proud of. The other, notes those moments in their past year where they fell short. Other people, simply sit down and begin to write--letting their thoughts and their pen, or their keyboard, take them to wherever their memories lead.

For many of us, myself included, we need a little help figuring out just where to start. Sometimes, its helpful to start out with some questions to really get our thoughts flowing. And to that end, I look to an organization called “10Q.” 10Q, a name which I believe refers to *ten questions*, is an innovative initiative designed to help us self-reflect. And they do so through this idea of a Cheshbon HaNefesh.

If you go on-line and log-on, they will provide you with 10 questions over the course of the high holidays. Each day, one will arrive in your email. And you then have the opportunity to think about it and respond as you like. At the end, you will have a full and robust accounting of your year. And if that’s not enough, the folks at 10Q will keep your responses safe and send them back to you just before the next high holiday season next year! What a great way to look back?!

For those of us who prefer to live lives away from computers, and even for those of us who do embrace the online world, I have provided a page included in your programs with a list of questions from “10Q” that can serve as food for thought.

Without doubt, there’s no *wrong way* to go about writing a Cheshbon Hanefesh. That being said, however, we must be careful to use our accountings of our soul to take us to a place of atonement and resolution as we move toward Yom Kippur. We must be careful as we take note of those moments where we fell short, that we do not let negative or hurtful self-judgement, arise in our minds. We are not looking to bruise our egos or devalue ourselves because of our short-comings. Nor are we looking to become haughty because of our success. Instead, we are looking to gain honesty and openness so that we might live in this high holiday season and approach the superlative atonement of Yom Kippur with sincerity, integrity, and absolution.

May we all go forth, into these days of awe, remembering where we have been, recalling who we are, hoping for who we might become, and may we do this with honesty, openness, and love.

Thoughts for a Cheshbon Hanefesh

1. Describe a significant experience that has happened in the past year. How did it affect you? Are you grateful? Relieved? Resentful? Inspired?
2. Is there something that you wish you had done differently this past year? Alternatively, is there something you're especially proud of from this past year?
3. Think about a major milestone that happened with your family this past year. How has this affected you?
4. Describe an event in the world that has impacted you this year. How? Why?
5. Have you had any particularly spiritual experiences this past year? How has this experience affected you? "Spiritual" can be broadly defined to include secular spiritual experiences: artistic, cultural, and so forth.
6. Describe one thing you'd like to achieve by this time next year. Why is this important to you?
7. How would you like to improve yourself and your life next year? Is there a piece of advice or counsel you received in the past year that could guide you in this project?
8. Is there something (a person, a cause, an idea) that you want to investigate more fully in the coming year?
9. What is a fear that you have and how has it limited you? How do you plan on letting it go or overcoming it in the coming year?
10. Next year, at this time, how do you think you'll feel? What do you think/hope might be different about your life and where you're at as a result of thinking about and answering these questions?

*Questions based upon the Reboot initiative, "10q" (found at www.doyou10q.com)
Reboot is a Jewish enterprise catalyst that works to facilitate creative innovation in the Jewish world. You can learn more at www.rebooters.net.*