

Heshbon haNefesh: An Accounting of the Soul
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A couple of weeks ago an Op-Ed appeared in the New York Times, graphically charting some of the major world events of past 5 years since September 11, 2001.¹

Second Intifada
Afghan invasion
Collapse of Enron
Disintegration of Space Shuttle Columbia
Invasion of Iraq
outbreak and containment of SARS
 Madrid train bombings
 Abu Ghraib
 Russian School Massacre
 Genocide in Darfur
 Hurricane Katrina
 Avian Flu
 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza
 earthquake in Pakistan
 Hamas wins victory
 Dick Cheney shoots a guy(!)
 Israel fights war with Hezbollah
 trans-Atlantic terror plot thwarted

My friends, we are living in time of cataclysmic upheaval. We come to Rosh Hashanah asking what it means to be a Jew and a human being when the world looks as it does?

Rav Kook taught:

There are those who sing the song of their own soul, finding therein everything: full spiritual satisfaction...

And there are those who sing the song of the people, moving beyond their own soul, reaching for more powerful heights...

And there are those whose souls lift beyond the limitation of Israel, to sing the song of all humanity. This spirit expands to include the glory of the human image and its dreams...

And there are those who lift beyond this level, becoming one with all creation and all creatures, and all the worlds... and with all of these worlds sing a song...

And there are those who rise together with the bungle of all these songs. All of them sing out, each gives meaning and life to the other.

And this completeness is the song of holiness, the song of God, and the song of Israel.²

1 New York Times, 9/7/06.

2 Rabbi Abraham Isaac haCohen Kook.

Our rabbis lay out a counter-instinctual path: In order to transform the soul of the world, we must first be willing to transform our own souls. A world of peace and justice will come only when we journey from the self outward. In order to begin to bring healing to the world, we must first sing the song of the soul -- a song of pain, loss, triumph and fulfillment.

We begin the New Year by exploring the inner reaches of our lives, doing *Heshbon haNefesh*, a bold, unapologetic, unequivocal Accounting of the Soul. We ask ourselves: Who am I? Where am I in my life? In what ways have I let my insecurities, my self doubt stifle me? In what ways have I hardened my heart to the people around me? What relationships am I in that diminish my dignity? Have I let myself love? Have I let others love me? What pain have I caused? What potential do I have? Has my year been marked more by longing or gratitude? By brokenness or wholeness? By distrust or faith? By animus or by love? Rav Kook taught that a person could not rise to the spiritual level of seeking the healing of society without a deep inner *teshuvah* for every personal wrongdoing.³ So here our work begins.

Like so many of us, Jacob runs away from home. After deceiving his father and brother and bringing immeasurable pain to his family, he runs rather than endure the consequences. But Jacob cannot escape, because he thinks he is running from a vengeful Esau (angry that his birthright was stolen), but in actuality he is running away from himself. In sheer exhaustion, Jacob puts his head down on a rock at night, and he falls into a deep sleep.

In his sleep he has a vision of a ladder rooted on earth but reaching all the way to heaven, with angels are traveling up and down. The Hasidic Master Ephraim of Sudlikov (the *Degel Mahane Ephraim*) interprets Jacob's vision, saying that the constant motion -- upward and downward -- is a metaphor for the spiritual life.⁴

Each one of us has times of deep connection to God, to Torah, to our partners and friends, to the best of ourselves. Maybe some of us here tonight have experienced that depth of connection this year. The *Degel Mahane Ephraim* describes these as moments of "expanded consciousness," symbolized in the vision by the angels ascending the ladder.

But there are also times of deep disconnect from God, from Torah, from partners and friends, from ourselves, times when we are embarrassed by the way that we have behaved, ashamed of the person we've become. And in these moments we are afflicted by a "contracted consciousness," symbolized in Jacob's dream by the angels descending the ladder.

The great truth revealed here is that it is completely normal for a person to experience both the upward and downward moments -- that this fluctuation is an inherent dimension of a dynamic

3 Rav Kook, *Orot HaTeshuvah* p. 50

4 I thank Rabbi Shai Held for introducing me to this beautiful interpretation.

spiritual life. Anyone who is spiritually and emotionally awake will inevitably have moments of deep disconnect. Similarly, any real relationship (marriage, friendship, partnership) will inevitably have moments of deep alienation. Not only is it completely normal, but it is actually spiritually healthy for us to have moments of darkness, of disunity, of disconnect. In fact, this is what makes us spiritually alive! *The spiritual life is not a quest for contentment, but rather a quest for authenticity.* And an authentic experience of the world sometimes renders us moments of contracted consciousness.

The danger is that we see ourselves stuck on the bottom rung of the ladder. We imagine that we are paralyzed in the place of darkness and disconnect, that our spiritual lives, our relationships, our careers, our families *must be as they are*. But Jacob's vision points to the power of spiritual mobility. The figures ascending and descending the ladder are in constant motion, never dwelling too long on the bottom rung.

A stone is characterized by its finality, whereas man's outstanding quality is in its being a surprise. To claim to be what I am not is a pretension. To insist that I must be only what I am now is a restriction which human nature must abhor. The being of a person is never complete, final.

-Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is Man?*

It's so hard to change. So many of us look at our darkest bruises and say "My marriage will never change" -- or "This is just who I am. I can't shake it" -- all the while racing forward with our lives, papering over the anguish growing beneath the surface.

In the eyes of our tradition, this is nothing short of heretical. To be awake and alive is to be dynamic --

to resist the petrification of self that comes from fear of change,
to allow ourselves to transform and be transformed,
to acknowledge that although there is often serious loss in change (it may mean giving up something that is core to our sense of self--),

we can survive the tumult and come out the other side.

The irony is that we need to stop running, stop filling our lives with empty calories, stop moving, in order to realize that we are truly mobile, spiritually. Jacob has to literally put his head on a rock -- which *is* unchangeable and complete -- in order to remember that he is not yet complete.

Thus Jacob's vision is at once a rejection of escapism -- running away from ourselves, and at the same time a warning not to submit to the rigidification of the self.

But it can also be read as an affirmation that life must be lived with firm roots in real world -- the base of the ladder -- yet simultaneously with deep attachment to the values and ideals of heaven -- the ladder's peak.

We must in the same breath hold who we are -- with our limitations, our loneliness, our lack of direction -- and who we dream we can become -- people fulfilled, loved and in love, creatively challenged, spiritually and intellectually awake.

We must in the same breath hold the reality of our world -- plagued by terror, hatred and indifference, by poverty, hopelessness, illness and loss -- and dream of what the world could be -- one in which all children can eat before going to bed at night, in which nobody is orphaned to AIDS, in which Jews and Christians and Muslims can share in God's blessings with hearts open to one another, in which love triumphs over hatred and compassion over brutality.

As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, if we dwell only in the reality, we forget to imagine that our lives and the world can look different than they do. But, at the same time, if we dwell only in the dream, we forget to get our hands dirty working to repair the reality. The angels travelling up and down come to symbolize the authenticity of both the reality and the dream, and the fluidity between the two. Our challenge is to be able to bridge the division between the two, and, like the angels, to work to bring our reality closer to the world we dream of and long for.

Jacob sees this vision in a moment of darkness, fear and loneliness. From that darkness, Jacob is told to stop running away and instead confront his real capacity to change, and to dream that his life can be different than it is. What a powerful challenge for us! It is precisely in our moments of fear, isolation and even paralysis, that we are reminded to *dream* -- to imagine waking up every morning to a renewed sense of purpose and meaning in our lives.

Many of us see ourselves tonight at the bottom of the ladder.

We have made terrible mistakes,
we have spoken badly about friends and colleagues,
we have been callous and dismissive.
We have projected our love where it does not belong,
and withheld it from where it *does*.
We have let our insecurities paralyze us.
We have devalued others,
we have devalued ourselves.
We have neglected our families,
we have neglected the world for the sake of our families...

The foundational assumption of the holidays is that if we don't stop to engage these questions, we will continue to run through our lives, filling ourselves up with distractions -- cars, vacations, frenzied work lives, (frenzied) social lives -- and avoiding the real work that needs to be done. But comes Rosh Hashanah to force us to stop -- to assess, to redress, to recreate, to reengage, to emerge from the paralysis of our spiritual escapism. Rosh Hashanah is our ROCK: it is unchanging -- the *mahzor* is the same, the *nusah* is the same -- but our encounter with it every year awakens within us the realization that we are different. Stop running, and realize that you possess great spiritual mobility. Rest your weary heads on the rock-pillow of the High Holy Days, and recognize that as human beings we fundamentally differ from rigid and unchangeable rocks.

“*Hayom harat olam*” -- today is the birth of something completely new.

I can move, I can change, I can forgive, I can be forgiven.

I can be the mother, husband, sister, friend, teacher, writer, artist I need to be.

I can step out of the lethargy of self doubt and fully become myself.

I can transform my life tonight,

through *teshuvah* -- working toward reconciliation, asking for forgiveness and granting it,

through *tefillah* -- turning to God with an open and humble heart and allowing some light to seep in,

through *zedakah* -- devoting myself to justice, dignity and peace in our world.

Jacob wakes up after his dream and proclaims: אָכֵן יֵשׁ ה' בְּמִקְוֹם הַגָּה וְאֵנִי כִּי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי: -- Surely God dwells in this place, and I, I didn't know it! (Gen. 28:16).

What does God's presence mean to Jacob in that moment?

Maybe that he is not alone, no matter how lonely he is.

Maybe that the answers he was searching for were already within him.

Maybe that he -- a person created in the image of God -- has the capacity to recreate himself.

May we, too, wake up -- and, sensing God's guiding presence, begin to walk forward, purposefully and intentionally, toward a new life.

Shanah Tovah.