ELUL 5778
A Guide for Reflection and Contemplation to Prepare You for the High Holy Days

WiseLA.org/HighHolyDays
A DIAMOND EXPERT
Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback

A story is told about Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn (1860-1920), the Fifth Chabad Rebbe. Once he was sitting with one of his disciples, a man called Reb Munyeh, who was a diamond merchant. The Rebbe began to talk about a few members of his congregation who had come to visit him recently. They weren’t major donors or scholars of renown. They were simple, regular folk. When the Rebbe finished, Reb Munyeh asked him why he was making such a fuss over these people. Responded the Rebbe: “Because they have extraordinary qualities.”

Said Reb Munyeh: “I don’t see it. What’s so extraordinary about them?”

The Rebbe sat quietly for a few minutes. Then he asked: “Do you have any diamonds with you?” Reb Munyeh nodded. “Show me the best one,” said the Rebbe. Reb Munyeh pulled an extremely valuable diamond out of one of the pockets of his coat. Said the Rebbe: “Why is this so valuable? I don’t see it.”

Reb Munyeh said, “You have to be a maven, an expert, to understand diamonds.”

The Rebbe said: “Every person is like that diamond but you have to be a maven, an expert, in order to see it.”

As the High Holy Days approach, let us pause to consider the extraordinary qualities in those around us - friends, family, colleagues. Every person has beautiful qualities that we can admire and from which we can learn. In this New Year, let’s all work on being mavens, experts, in recognizing and celebrating the priceless value of those around us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

2 Elul | August 13
What three words would you hope your loved ones would use to describe you?

3 Elul | August 14
Of which of these qualities are you proudest? Which one(s) do you want to to work on in the year ahead?

4 Elul | August 15
A year from now, what three words would you hope your loved ones use to describe you?
A few years ago, reflecting on Shabbat Shuva (the Shabbat between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur), I wrote the following:

The “Ten Days of Repentance” are an opportunity for us to examine and contemplate our own behavior and how we interact in the world with each other. It is a time to ask those whom we have hurt, forgotten, dismissed, treated wrongly, not shown kindness to, to forgive us. It is a time for us to forgive ourselves for those things that we wished we could take back, or not said, or not have done. We truly cannot move forward until we unburden ourselves from the guilt and shame, which is the opportunity “Teshuvah” offers us each year.

Shuva Yisrael, means return to the ways that our tradition teaches us to act towards one another, that we are all created in the image of God, and need to see ourselves in others. We are taught, that asking our fellow human beings for forgiveness, is when God hears our pleas to be forgiven. The text says “ad Adonai”, which is read to God, but if you change the vowel under ad, it can be eid, which means witness. Thus the verse could read, Do teshuvah Yisrael, because you are the witness to the Lord, Your God, or because God is your witness.

May God witness our deepest desire to make amends with family and friends, and all those who are in our lives. It is “The Time”, to return to the path of the best behavior we know we can aspire towards.

May the New Year be our time to return to all that is good and be witness to the blessings that have received.

**Reflection Questions:**

6 Elul | August 17

From which 3 people in my life do I need to ask forgiveness?

7 Elul | August 18

What qualities of ourselves do we most seek out in others? Which qualities of ourselves do we find most frustrating in others?
What is the best advice you received from your parents or grandparents? What words do you carry with you, even if they have died? What do you want your children or grandchildren to remember from your life and actions?

Our parents and grandparents leave behind much in legacy; it can be physical (a house or a business), emotional (laughter, tears, and memories), and it can be moral (guidance and values). The tradition of leaving behind an Ethical Will (zava’ah in Hebrew) — an actual written statement of values and hopes — is an ancient one in Judaism; as early as the Talmud (around 500CE), we see the concept of an orally transmitted ethical will. Some believe its origin dates back as far as the Torah.

This month of Elul is dedicated to reflection; we are meant to consider our actions of the past year and think ahead to how we want to change our behavior in the year to come. During this month of Elul, consider writing an Ethical Will to your children, or grandchildren. If you do not have children, you can share your Ethical Will with other loved ones. In your Ethical Will, focus on the values you most want your loved ones to embrace and shape the way they live. Express the essential lessons you have learned in your life and your hopes for them (beyond their happiness). If God and Judaism are central, then include these sentiments. Share advice, personal stories and expressions of gratitude. If it is an inducement to write, consider limiting your piece to a few pages.

Composing an Ethical Will compels us to clarity and prioritize our ideals. For that alone, this exercise is worthwhile; if the values we most cherish and wish to convey are not clear to us, it is very difficult to convey them to our loved ones. Share your Ethical Will before the start of the High Holidays. If you gather for a family meal on Erev Rosh Hashana, consider reading it to them. If not, send it in the days before the High Holidays.
Would you treasure such a document from your mother, your father, your grandparents? What better time than this month of Elul to put your thoughts to paper? You will leave a spiritual and ethical legacy for this and future generations. May God bring great blessings to you and your loved ones in the coming year.

P.S. Among the many excellent books on this topic is *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them* edited by Rabbi Jack Reimer and Nathaniel Stampfer.

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**A DAY LIKE PURIM**

Rabbi Ron Stern

It is hard to imagine two days more different than Purim and Yom Kippur, and yet the rabbis of our tradition dared to make the discordant comparison. Purim the day of merriment and abandon, evocative of Mardi Gras; Yom Kippur solemn and awe evoking, reminding us of our mortality. And yet, in a bit of wordplay, the rabbis imagine that we should read Yom Kippur — the Day of Atonement, as Yom KiPurim — a day like Purim.

But, of course, the wordplay is only the contrivance through which a deeper comparison was made. Some suggest it’s all about the masks we wear. On Purim we put them on, hide behind them, become someone we are not. On Purim we can live our fantasies of sorts: we are kings and queens, evil conspirators, or noble saviors. We pretend to be people we are not and play a game that ends as soon as we lower the masks. At its core, Purim is about chance and happenstance, about coincidence and whimsy.

If Purim is about masks of fantasy, about being who we are not — Yom Kippur is the polar opposite. On Purim we put the masks on, for Yom Kippur we take our masks off. On Purim
we can pretend; on Yom Kippur, we seek to remove all pretense; we must face who we truly are. During the year we fill roles that present the self we believe we need to be — or want to be. On one day of fasting and self-denial, the masquerading stops. Yom Kippur reminds us that much of life is indeed beyond our control and dares to suggest that if we change ourselves we might change our fate. Yom Kippur reminds us that our lives are short, our relationships are fragile, and that our actions can make a difference.

While Purim is about bright colors, and all that glitters, on Yom Kippur tradition instructs us to wear white, the blank slate of a fresh start stripped of adornments and false façades. From a place of that simplicity, Yom Kippur opens the promise that we can begin again each year to become the authentic self that hides within. Through this brilliantly abrupt and cognitively disruptive comparison the ancient rabbis invite us to experience Yom Kippur in ways that not only stretch our imagination but also refine our souls.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

10 Elul | August 21
What are the masks that you wear?

11 Elul | August 22
What aspect of your authentic self will you work to reveal (or hide!) this year?

MISSING THE MARK

As we enter the month of Elul, we stand before the Gates of Repentance. with the promise of a new tomorrow just before our eyes. The message of the these days, repeated in the liturgy and the music, begs us to change, to reinvent, to come a little closer to our best self than we did the year before. We are to confront our sins and through tefilah, u’tzedakah, u’teshuvah — prayer, righteous acts, and the work of repentance — begin to turn towards better behaviors, towards a better self, maybe even towards a better life.

Unlike the starker definitions of the word, the word for sin in Hebrew, chet, is the same as the word for arrow. It is a suggestion that, rather than obvious or shocking wrongdoing, most of us come to these days reflecting on the ways that we missed the mark, that we simply did not behave as we wanted to, or
were not wholly the person we want to be. Dr. Carol Ochs, in her book Jewish Spiritual Guidance, breaks down all the ways that we see — or miss the mark. Among them, she teaches about sin as alienation, sin as inauthenticity, sin as division, sin as disordered love, sin as impatience, sin as refusal to love, sin as refusal to recognize that we are loved, sin as jealousy in love, sin as refusal to grow.

Do any of these sound familiar?

We are in the month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holy Days. We are not at the point of forgiveness, not even at the point of small — or deep — change. Rather, teshuvah is the pre-work, the homework, the spiritual work. Teshuvah is the work of repentance and repair, not of appeasing our loved ones, but of reconnecting with them, of reopening relationships and redefining them truthfully.

It is the work of deep introspection, of honest apology, of the vulnerability to say and hear things that are hard, that are hurtful, and that might have the power to release us and change us, to bring us closer to the lives we want to live and the selves we want to be.

As the High Holy Days approach, the Gates of Repentance will open before us. Will you enter?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:
13 Elul | August 24

In which of your important relationships have you missed the mark this year? How?

14 Elul | August 25

Are there specific behavior changes you can commit to making in that relationship?
On July 22, Jewish people throughout the world congregated for a day of fasting and lament. Called Tisha B’Av, or the ninth of Av, the day was selected by our sages to commemorate two disastrous defeats suffered by Israel against her enemies in antiquity that led to our ancestors’ exile, as well as the destruction of the first and second holy temples in Jerusalem. Jews observe the day in solemnity, reading from the Book of Lamentations, a text that bemoans the disasters that had befallen the Jews.

The following week, however, begins a series of Haftarah readings designed not to fill us with grief, but with hope. Beginning on the Shabbat following Tisha B’Av and culminating with the Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh HaShanah, Jews read passages from the prophet Isaiah that reassure the Jewish people of their deliverance and return to Zion.

We often associate the days of Elul with teshuvah, or atonement for our misdeeds. However, these texts of comfort invite us to see repentance not as a burden to undertake, but rather as an opportunity to seize. God’s offer of redemption to those who wish to return is also a reminder of Divine mercy. Just as God remembered the Jews in exile, so, too, does God remember us in our lives today. No matter how far we’ve strayed from our intended path, we can always return, and, as the prophet Isaiah claims, God awaits us with open arms.
As we begin our annual preparation for the High Holy Days, we often do ourselves a disservice when we imagine that we might somehow finally transform into perfect beings this year during our process of teshuvah, repentance. Indeed, teshuvah itself is our own recognition that we were not perfect in the past year, and yet, we still seek to better ourselves and our relationships.

Instead of aiming for perfection, how might we attempt to reach for shalom and shleimut — peace and wholeheartedness — in our relationships with others and with ourselves? I love this quote on wholeheartedness from researcher and storyteller, Dr. Brené Brown:

Wholehearted living is about engaging with our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion and connection to wake up in the morning and think, ‘No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.’ It’s going to bed at night thinking, ‘Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.

Brown invites us to consider how living wholeheartedly, with a sense of shalom, allows for us to be our truly imperfect but best selves. Even if our teshuvah is imperfect in its delivery, if it comes from a sincere and vulnerable place, it will be warmly received by our loved ones and by God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:
19 Elul | August 30
Where did we mistakenly strive for perfection this past year? In the year to come, how might we instead consider bringing our whole selves — flaws and vulnerabilities included — to these situations and relationships instead?

20 Elul | August 31
Who did we wrong this past year by aiming for perfection? What are the honest and authentic reparations we must make to those we have wronged?
FINDING BALANCE  
Tami Weiser, Head of School

In 2016, I had the opportunity to attend a Rosh Chodesh gathering at the home of a Wise School parent. At this program, a slam-poet sat with a typewriter. She met with each individual, asked a few questions, and then — based on those few questions — composed a poem on the spot.

The words that the poet, Jacqueline Suskin, wrote for me that evening are still hanging above my computer, and I wanted to share them with you. She wrote:

“Balance”
What work it takes
To blend our being
And find that common
Ground, that steady
Space of true satisfaction
Where we ring in our
Balance best.
How it comes and goes,
Like a wave or tide
To take us into all effort,
To have us search and sit
Within the difficulty
Of its coming and then,
Finally with tranquil
Presence we slip into
Such a perfect pause.

As we enter the month of Elul, what do we need to do to achieve balance in our lives? What is the balance of work, family, friends, personal needs? How will we know when we get there?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

22 Elul | September 2
How did we do with balance this past year?
What are our aspirational balance goals for the upcoming year?

23 Elul | September 3
What would it look like if we lived a balanced life — the perfect pause?
I often hear adults with young children frame the idea of *teshuvah*, repentance, within the context of saying, “I’m sorry.” On the surface, “I’m sorry” seems much more of a simple concept, and *teshuvah* can be so very daunting even for adults. But, accessed in a developmentally appropriate way, even the youngest of children are absolutely capable of reflection. As we are tasked with taking a closer look at ourselves, reflecting on our year, taking inventory of our lives and how we relate to others, our children can do the same.

Here are the challenges with aligning the idea of *teshuvah* with the words, “I’m sorry,” for a 2-5 year old:

- **Young children are not always sorry for the things we think they should be sorry for.**
- **Young children don’t always realize they have done something wrong, and are not yet capable of understanding that, as they are very much still in the “me” phase of life.**
- **When forced, the apology is inauthentic, and when done as a reflection of the year, the child is so far removed from any situation that we feel warranted the apology, that there is absolutely no meaning attached to it.**
The words “I’m sorry” don’t mean a whole lot to a three year-old. But learning to be kind, learning to be respectful of other people and making amends when we fall short is something they absolutely can grasp and practice, and values that, over time, will help them to understand the “I’m sorry.” When children change their behavior, it is, in essence, their teshuvah. This is especially meaningful when it is modeled both at home and at school.

As with most of the lessons we learn in our early childhood, these principles ring true for us as adults as well. Our tradition makes clear that apology is only a single step in the process of teshuvah. And so, if we take that big idea of reflection, and ask some guiding questions for adults and children, we can find ourselves having an incredibly spiritual entry into the new year with our families, whether they include young children or not.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- **25 Elul | September 5**
  What are some behaviors you or your child learned or worked on in the past year?

- **26 Elul | September 6**
  What are your goals around behavior for the coming year? For you? For your child?

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**THE POWER OF PLAY:**

**SEEK JOY IN THE UPCOMING YEAR**

*Ashley Marx, Director of Religious School*

“There was no day of greater joy in Israel than... Yom Kippur.” - B. Ta’anit 30b

At first glance, this Talmudic text might seem strange. Yom Kippur and joy? After all, aren’t these holy days, and this month of Elul leading up to them, a time for somber reflection? While allowing time for personal penitence, reflecting on shortcomings, and vowing to hit the mark in the coming year are all critical pieces of preparing for and marking our holy days, perhaps this is a
reminder to make sure that joy and celebration are included in the mix — from the elation in celebrating with community to the solace of reaching the season.

Allowing time to appreciate joy is important not only in the time of the High Holy Days, but in our daily lives as well. In his book *Play*, Dr. Stuart Brown argues that “play” is a muscle that should be exercised. In fact, it is as essential to our health as drinking enough water or taking vitamins! Dr. Brown writes:

> Every day, everywhere there are opportunities to find play: throw a tennis ball for a dog, pull a string for a kitten, browse in a bookstore... The world is full of humor, irony, joy, and objects available for aesthetic appreciation. The trick is allowing yourself to open up to those influences... People begin to close themselves off when they start to feel they should always be serious, always be productive... Activities that by all rights should be play, like a game of golf, can be treated like a self-improvement program or a chance to get ahead in someway...

> [Play] can foster innovation and lead to million-dollar fortunes. But in the end the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect most deeply with the best in ourselves, and in others.

The month of Elul presents an opportunity to reflect on not only how we will approach these holy days, but our year ahead. The space for solemnity is clear; perhaps our tradition is equally clear that we need to make time — as we do on Purim — for joy and for play.

May you approach the upcoming year with a renewed sense of play, and joy.

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**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

28 Elul | September 8

Try keeping a “play and joy” journal. For a week, schedule in one thing you will do each day to bring joy into your life. At the end of each day, write down what from the day (whether or not it was the scheduled activity) increased your sense of play.

29 Elul | September 9

Create a regular “happiness ritual” – how can you start or end each day with this practice? This could be anything from listening to a favorite song, to writing down three things in life that bring you joy.
You are invited to choose from our two Erev Rosh Hashanah experiences in the Stephen Wise Temple Sanctuary

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Stephen Wise Temple Campus</th>
<th>Skirball Cultural Center</th>
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<td>Monday, September 10</td>
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<td><strong>Yom Kippur Day</strong></td>
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<td>Wednesday, September 19</td>
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<td>12:45–3:30 p.m. (late)</td>
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<td><em>Both services conclude with Yizkor</em></td>
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<td><strong>Yom Kippur Afternoon</strong></td>
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<td>Wednesday, September 19</td>
<td>4:30 p.m. (Mincha)</td>
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<td>5:30 p.m. (Neilah*)</td>
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*Neilah start times are approximate.*
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<tr>
<th>Service &amp; Date</th>
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<td>Family Soulful Service</td>
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<td><strong>Rosh Hashanah: Tiny T’filah</strong></td>
<td>Up to age 5</td>
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**Days of Awesome**

Wise Campus only
Rosh Hashanah Day and Yom Kippur Day only
Children’s experiences for kids from TK/DK to 6th Grade.
While the grown-ups are in congregational services, join us for camp-style games, activities, song sessions, and more.

**Child Care**

Wise Campus and Bel Air Church
All services
Designed for kids up to age 5.
Open to kids up to age 9.
Kids will enjoy playtime while grown-ups worship.

Registration required: WiseLA.org/HighHolyDays
A SELECTION FROM PSALM 27

It is traditional to read the words of Psalm 27 each day from Rosh Chodesh Elul (the first day of Elul) through Simchat Torah. Its words, including supplications to God and reminders of God’s love and protection, are thematically appropriate and meant to inspire our work of repentance in this season.

1. Adonai is my Light and my Help; whom will I fear?
Adonai is the Strength of my life; who can make me afraid?

2. When evil people draw near to devour my flesh -- it is these foes and enemies who stumble and fall.

3. Even if an army rises up against me, my heart will have no fear! Even if a whole war besets me, I will still feel secure.

4. One thing I ask from Adonai, one thing I seek: to dwell in Adonai’s house all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of Adonai, to explore Adonai’s sanctuary.

5. Adonai will shelter me in a Sukkah on an evil day; Adonai will conceal me in the secret shelter of a tent, raise me up safely upon a rock.