

Rosh Hashana Words –d’rash. 2025

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As some of you know, for the past five years I’ve been teaching essay writing and some other things at a secondary school for high-achieving, low-income students in Zimbabwe. I begin most classes with a prompt. One of my favorites from last summer was, What is your favorite word and why? To help the students focus, I first asked for three favorite words, and then they had to narrow them down to one.

Some choices that the students selected as their favorite word were pretty obvious; others were fun. For example, they wrote,

Family	Curiosity
Hope	Resilience
Why?	Soccer
Sorry	(and) Food

When preparing for today’s drash, I thought about the significance of the words we use during this holiday, emphasizing themes of personal reflection, forgiveness, and renewal. After all, Jews are considered *People of the Book*, and books are comprised of words. But the words we use are not only personal, focusing on just ourselves: I imagine that you (like me) are probably also thinking about your family and friends, and maybe about other challenges or opportunities that may arise in the coming year.

In addition, we are all deeply troubled by world news, affecting each of us in different but profound ways: Whatever our views, we share a deep anxiety

concerning the Israeli hostages, the ongoing trauma that permeates Israel; the devastating war in Gaza coupled with the decimation of Palestinian villages in the West Bank; and -- back home -- the loss of democracy coupled with rising anti-Semitism in this country. What will the new year portend, we wonder with some fear and guarded hope? Sitting here today, how can we express our individual teshuva – our personal repentance -- under the shadow of these global forces?

So...let me pose this question: What words would you use to describe Rosh Hashanah and the Yomim Noraim that follow? In particular, what words do you choose for prayer and with each other? And why does our choice of words even matter?

Let's think about words for a moment:

1. **Words are Reflections:** We think back to the words we have been using the past year. Have they been truthful, compassionate, and constructive?
2. **Words are Bridges:** Rosh Hashanah is a time for strengthening relationships and seeking forgiveness. How do we express that in the words we use?
3. **Words lead to Behaviors and Actions:** Rosh Hashanah calls us to become more mindful and purposeful with our intentions.
4. **Words are Prayers:** They express our teshuva and connection to God
5. (and finally) **Words are Blessings:** Through the words we use, we share our hopes for renewal and our good wishes for the future.

With so many meanings, it is hard to boil down our feelings about Rosh Hashana into just a few words. Nevertheless, I'm going to ask you to try that right now.

Think quietly for a few moments: pick out three words that represent this year's Rosh Hashanah to you – just three words that characterize how you think about this holiday.

(pause)

Now, think again, like I made the students do in Zimbabwe. What one word bubbles to the surface? One word that is your mantra, your focus, your word of prayer for right now?

(pause)

Take a deep breath and, if you are comfortable, turn to your neighbors where you are sitting and share your words -maybe all three of them, or maybe just the main one. Why did you choose these words? How do they represent your connection to Rosh HaShanah this year?

I'll give you two minutes for an exchange and then we'll continue with the service.

Wishing everyone a year of good health, peace, and abundant blessings.
Shanah Tovah tikitevu.