

As a child, I never knew Rosh Hashanah had so many names.

I always love the idea that today is the birthday of the world, but sitting in synagogue a big chunk of the day was never my idea of a great way to spend any birthday!

As I grew up, I learned that Rosh Hashanah is also known as *Yom T'ruah*, the day of the blowing of the shofar...

...and *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Remembrance.

It seemed pretty easy to understand why both names were part of the holiday.

Now that I am all grown up and have, in fact, embarked on the last third of my life, I find myself contemplating the idea that today is *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment, when all humans are said to be judged by our creator and the fate of each individual is inscribed in the Book of Life.

Really??? No pressure there.

Well, okay, maybe some. After all, when taken seriously, these Days of Awe from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, and the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, are a fragile time...with lives – OUR LIVES – apparently hanging in the balance.

In doing some reading these past weeks, I was absolutely struck when I read what Rabbi Alan Lew said in his insightful, inspiring book *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (gotta love the title!) --- Rabbi Lew wrote:

For ten days, the gates are open and the world is fluid. We are finally awake, if only in fits and starts, if only to toss and turn. For ten days, transformation is within our grasp. For ten days, we can imagine ourselves not as fixed and immutable beings, but rather as a limitless field upon which qualities and impulses rise up and fall away again like waves on the sea.

These are the days of *teshuvah*, repentance. This is the time more than any other during the year that we as individuals and also as a community, commit ourselves to looking inward and to changing for the better.

So, what does this idea of repentance mean to me? Do we just have to say “I’m sorry” and we are forgiven? What if we add “And I’ll never ever do it again”? Is that enough? I mean really, What does it mean to repent?

I came across something else Rabbi Lew said, which is that *teshuvah* is not simply repentance, but it is really a returning to our inner source of holiness and transcendence. Wow! Holiness. And transcendence. Already Inside. Of me. Here for the taking and using as needed.

As I started thinking about this idea of such wonderful qualities as already being a part of me, I started to re-examine the Jewish concept of human nature, specifically yetzer tov and yetzer hara, and how this concept relates to repentance...what it has to do with my choosing what kind of person I want to be in the coming year.

I remember the evening of September 11, 2001. After that most horrific day, I was trying to be calm and not tearful as I was tucking my then 5-year-old son Sam into bed. Suddenly he looked up at me very seriously and asked me if Osama bin Laden was an evil man and if he was born that way. I wanted so much to just yell out, “Yes, as evil as evil can be.” But at a time when I felt so overwhelmed by despair and fear, I didn’t want Sam to think that evil just existed on its own and we are powerless to control it. As I stalled for time, I tried to think of how I could turn the tragedy and horror of what had happened that day into something at least somewhat positive for my child. What was the teachable moment here?

And then from someplace that I had not ever articulated all that much, the answer came -- and I talked to Sam in simple terms he could understand about the choices we humans all have...how each of us is born with the *yetzer tov*, the desire and ability to choose to do good things...the moral conscience or inner voice of self-control...the source of doing the right thing. I remember saying something about it’s like really, really wanting the toy someone else has and being able to stop ourselves from just going ahead and just grabbing it away from the other person or even better, having a favorite toy that we willingly share with that someone else.

Talking about the *yetzer hara* was a bit trickier. I explained that I believe we are all born also with something inside of us that is a desire or impulse to do things that are bad or selfish...like grabbin that toy. Left uncontrolled, this impulse can lead to real harm, to the doing of bad things small and large.

And finally I tried to put the two concepts together to answer Sam's question by saying that no one is born just evil or just good. We all have both parts inside of us and it's up to us to choose how we are going to live.

We as adults understand this ability to choose the nature of our actions is at the heart of the Jewish concept of free will. To acknowledge *yetzer tov* and *yetzer hara* is to recognize and accept the choices we all have in our lives. It is to say that what we choose to do matters.

I love how Mark Twain put it:

"Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest. "

Politics aside and forgive the pun -- President Bush's 1000 points of light was a brilliant idea in part because it recognized the power to do good within every one of us. Each of those points of light was – and IS - a person who made a choice to do good and put the choice into action. And every point of light, every person taking action, counted and was a part of the whole.

Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and author Viktor Frankl was able to distill and find powerful meaning in his horrific experiences and observations as a concentration camp inmate. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, published in the year after liberation, he wrote:

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

It is our power to choose our response.

And we often don't know the impact of the choices we make to act out of goodness or something less...either now or sometimes ever. But big or small, all of our actions count

and they all have a ripple effect. It reminds me of the amazing British television series of the late seventies called “Connections” where the host James Burke contends that the entire gestalt of the modern world is the result of a web of interconnected events, each one consisting of a person or group acting for reasons of their own such as politics or religion or even curiosity. To demonstrate this view, Burke begins each episode with a particular event or innovation in the past, usually from Ancient or Medieval times, and he traces the path from that early point through a series of seemingly unrelated connections to a fundamental and essential aspect of the modern world. The interplay of the results of these isolated events is what drives history and innovation. So, for example, in one episode Burke traces the invention of papyrus writing paper to space travel.

It is no surprise that the series is subtitled “An Alternative View of Change.” Just as this television series contends that we cannot consider the development of any particular piece of the modern world in isolation, we cannot consider the choices of our lives in isolation even tho we can’t ever know for sure all the ripple effects of our choices and actions...even something as small as a smile of acknowledgement instead of stressed out detachment, if not outright rudeness, at the grocery check out has the power of that piece of papyrus.

It is scientifically accepted that dark is the absence of light, and black is the absence of white. Is evil the absence of good? Sometimes there are so many choices or the path is unclear and so we become immobilized, frozen, stuck in indecision. Dr. Leo Buscaglia, the author and motivational speaker also known as Dr Love, said:

I have a very strong feeling that the opposite of love is not hate – it’s apathy.

Not to choose is to keep the good in check along with the bad.

On Rosh Hashanah it is time to choose. These are the days of transformation. This is the time for returning to our inner source of holiness and transcendence.

As writer/director Cameron Crowe puts it so succinctly in the film Vanilla Sky:

“Every passing minute is another chance to turn it all around.”

Every day we have the chance to turn it around... To make the world a better place, bit by bit, decision by decision, choice by choice. And when enough of us choose good, anything is possible.

For every day that there is war, there can also be peace.

Every day that there is illness, there can also be healing.

Every day when a light goes out, more candles can be lit.

Every day when someone falls down, someone can help them up.

Every day that we believe we are cursed, let us remember we are truly blessed.

Every day we feel disappointment, let us strive to live in hope.

Rosh Hashanah is all about living in grace and hope. It is our new year of the soul. We wipe the slate clean by coming to terms with who we have been, who we are and who we strive to be. We ask ourselves again and again -- What really matters? And, knowing the answer, we re-commit ourselves to making the choices that mean we are living as our highest and best selves.

As Albert Einstein said:

“True religion is real living; living with all one's soul, with all one's goodness and righteousness.”

Some say the apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah is a symbolic way of asking God for a good and sweet year. This year, let the apples and honey also remind each us to CHOOSE the sweet life. It is there for us to taste, to live, to share.

And as my Sephardic ancestors have said for hundreds of years during these special days... I wish you all Anyos muchos y Buenos – Many years and good ones.

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