

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXIII No. 1

Tishei 5775/September 2014



בראשית

POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS

Rabbi Eliyahu Fink

Rosh Hashana is a funny holiday. It's not funny because of the humorous High Holidays jokes that rabbis tell. The humor of Rosh Hashana is to be found in its inherent contradictions.

The most important aspect of Rosh Hashana is that it is our day of judgment, when every person's fate is determined by G-d. Who will live? Who will die? Who will prosper? Who will experience failure? The days and weeks preceding Rosh Hashana are filled with awe and reverence. We seek to make amends to anyone we might have hurt or slighted in the past year. It's a propitious time for introspection and focus on the task at hand, *teshuva* - repentance.

When the big day finally arrives, it begins with a short evening service followed by a festive dinner at home. At the Rosh Hashana evening meal, it is customary to dip apples into honey. Some people serve sweet challah at the meal and dip it into honey. Symbolic foods (pomegranates, fish, fish heads, carrots, among others) are eaten during the meal. Through it all, there seems to be nary a thought of forgiveness or judgment.

The next day, a few hours are spent in prayer in synagogue. While the Rosh Hashana prayers are a bit longer than usual, they do not express *(cont. on p. 2)*

ROSH HASHANA THE JOYOUS FESTIVAL!



CONNECTING TO THE FULL EXPERIENCE

Ilana Freedman

I grew up in a traditional but not an *halachically* observant household in England. While I was expected to go to synagogue regularly, I particularly enjoyed synagogue on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, because it was the time that I was able to catch up with two friends I only saw in synagogue on these days. We used to sit in the back and chat and get "shushed" by all the regulars. I never listened - after all, all the action was on the men's side - so we could talk as much as we liked. I did, however, enjoy the choir in my synagogue and loved joining in with the tunes of these special days. I remember waiting for the guy who blew the shofar to mess up. I also recall the special pride I felt those years that my father would get called up to make the blessings over the Torah or receive some other honor. But my actual level of spirituality on these holidays was rather low. I didn't connect it to anything greater than a good once-a-year social experience.

When I was studying at university, I started becoming more interested in my Jewish heritage and spent Rosh *(cont. on p. 3)*

DISCOVERING YOM KIPPUR

Katie Landy

If you have ever asked a group of Jews what their favorite Jewish holiday is, Chanukah, Purim, and sometimes Passover are the usual responses. I once asked one of my close friends about her favorite Jewish holiday, and, surprisingly, she responded Yom Kippur. When I asked her why, she said that she liked it because it is the hardest. Now, if you know my friend, this answer might make sense. However, for most people, myself included, I would venture to say that Yom Kippur is one of the least favorite Jewish holidays.

At that point in my life, there was one thing about which I could completely agree with my friend: Yom Kippur is definitely the hardest Jewish holiday. Not only do we fast for 25 hours, we are in synagogue all day. We constantly switch between sitting, standing, leaning over, bowing on the floor, hitting our chests, etc. Just to keep track of knowing if the ark is open and what part of the service you are up to is hard enough, let alone on an empty stomach with a parched throat. In addition, there is usually a very serious atmosphere, often some *(cont. on p. 2)*

POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS (cont. from p. 1)...thoughts of repentance. In fact, the focus seems to be on the shofar blasts--and more shofar blasts. There are a lot of shofar blasts. But still, no crying or begging for mercy.

In the afternoon, a walk is taken to a stream or lake where the *tashlich* prayer is recited. In this symbolic ritual, we ask that our sins be cast off so that we may enter the new year free of sin. Sin and forgiveness are implied in the prayer, but *tashlich* can hardly be described as the "grunt work" of perfecting oneself or changing one's character. Certainly our sins are not cast off just because we say *tashlich*. It is simply a symbolic ritual that reminds us to repent.

Which leads us to the punchline of Rosh Hashana. How many ways can we distract ourselves from the essence of what happens on Rosh Hashana?! Apples, honey, fun symbolic foods, shofar, *tashlich*...there a host of rituals that don't help us repent, but rather take our minds off the primary focus of the day!

Since it is the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashana could be a really hard day. People don't really enjoy hard days. We already have Yom Kippur on the calendar as a designated hard day. If Rosh Hashana were to be celebrated as two more hard days, it could actually take away from the overall High Holidays experience.

That the sages implemented rituals, traditions, and customs for Rosh Hashana is actually fortunate. While they seem to skirt around the primary focus of the day, these small acts remind us, in a sweet or interesting way, that Rosh Hashana is a judgment day. The rituals of Rosh Hashana are intended to appeal to our sense of taste, our appreciation for music - even rudimentary music like the shofar blast. Rituals such as *tashlich*, which include a trip outdoors and powerful symbolic gestures, are all ways of arousing our spirits to repent without banging us over the head with the "REPENT OR DIE" anvil.

These special customs of Rosh Hashana give this supreme day of religious obligation and spiritual accounting a flair of merriment so that we will be more engaged in the day. It's the old marketing principle that uses association to lure the customers into endorsing or purchasing a product. If it looks good and feels good, it has a better chance in the marketplace. Part of what makes things feel good and look good are the favorable associations we make in our minds.

Rosh Hashana is eased along by positive associations. We enjoy good food, the shofar evokes a deep and stirring nostalgia inside our souls, and *tashlich* takes us outside the synagogue. The distractions are not really distractions as much as they are bunting and balloons decorating a banquet hall. They may take the eye off the event for a moment, but overall they contribute to an atmosphere that is flavorful, fun, and festive.

Don't look at the Rosh Hashana traditions as separate from the Day of Judgment. Rather, they are the trappings that enhance the Day of Judgment. Enjoy the sweet food. Drink in the sounds of the shofar. Bask in the sunshine during *tashlich*. These are the rituals that give our holiday its special taste. Make them important. Make them meaningful. Make them a significant part of your Rosh Hashana.

When Rosh Hashana is regarded as a special time to which

we look forward, when we value the day and when we have good feelings about Rosh Hashana, we are far more likely to put more of our heart and soul into the Day of Judgment, and that will certainly have a positive effect on our verdict.

May we all merit a happy sweet New Year.

Rabbi Eliyahu Fink is the rabbi at Pacific Jewish Center/The Shul on the Beach in Venice, CA. He blogs for Haaretz.com and on his personal blog at finkorswim.com.

DISCOVERING YOM KIPPUR (cont. from p. 1)... crying, and little or no chitchat.

Based on all of this, I can easily understand why Yom Kippur does not top the favorite Jewish Holiday list. Several years ago, however, after experiencing Yom Kippur in Israel, my perspective changed.

Allow me to share that different perspective with you and, perhaps, move Yom Kippur further up on your list of favorite holidays.

"YOM KIPPUR: THE MOST CHALLENGING HOLIDAY!"



Ring... Ring... Ring...

Between the constant texts, Facebook notifications, and occasional actual phone calls, we are connected to more people on a daily basis than ever before. In a matter of seconds, we can get in touch with friends we haven't spoken to in years, and, since we have been viewing each other's pictures online all these years, it's like no time has passed at all. With communication taking up such a large portion of each day, many of us forget the most important relationship of all - our relationship with G-d. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just send G-d a quick text or Facebook message? Imagine how many friends G-d would have on Facebook! It seems crazy that we are able to connect with people from all over the world, but when it comes time to send a little prayer, the lines of communication appear lost. Even when we do manage to take out a prayer book or make it to Shabbat morning services, how often do our minds, inevitably, wander, and we end up thinking about lunch or that challenging work problem from the week before. So the question is, how can we stay in touch with G-d, despite all of the other demands in our busy lives?

This is where Yom Kippur comes in, because it is the day on which we try to emulate the *mal'achim* (angels). *Mal'achim* have a direct connection to G-d, a direct line that is never dropped and is always perfectly clear. *Mal'achim* are celestial beings who have one mission - to fulfill the word of G-d. (cont. on p. 3)

CONNECTING TO THE FULL EXPERIENCE (cont. from p. 1)...Hashanah in North Manchester with my seed partner (seed is a special, one-on-one, Jewish learning program). She took me to her favorite synagogue which was *Yekish* (German) in origin. I was fascinated by the fact that the synagogue she chose was not the one to which her husband went. (The concept of a husband and wife being members of and attending their preferred but different synagogues was very alien!) She said that at her chosen synagogue, they would be singing similar tunes to the ones I had grown up with. I appreciated that.

When I got there, I didn't realize I would be seeing very little of the men. The *mechitza* (divider) ran from the floor to the ceiling and was covered by a thick netting. Having been in a similar synagogue set-up once before, I fully expected to be bored out of my mind. However, I had an entirely different experience. Firstly, I could see that every single man had a *tallit* (prayer shawl) over his head, which completely obscured who he was, both when praying and when called up to the *bimah*. No one cared who was given the honor. They weren't paying attention to that detail. There was also no need for shushing at this synagogue. No one talked. Everyone was totally focussed on the *davening* (praying).

Then my seed partner quietly pointed out an elderly woman in the row in front of us. This lady, she said, was a Holocaust survivor who had lost her entire family in the Holocaust and, after the war, had to begin her life anew. I watched her closely. She was crying freely, her mouth moving with the prayers, her eyes shut tight. I noticed, too, that the impact of her intensity was like a wave - all those around her were picking up on her emotions, and she was pulling them with her toward G-d.

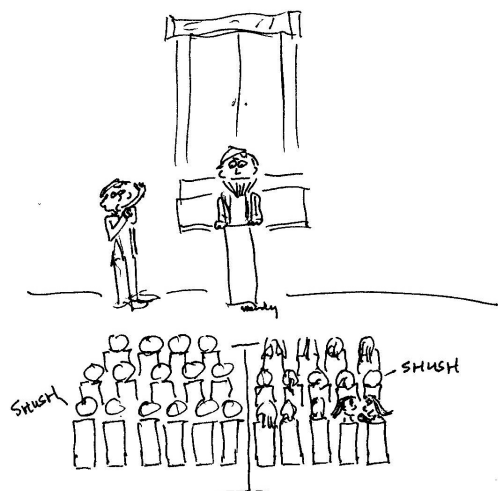
That Rosh Hashana I learned several important things.

First, that particular experience taught me what synagogue is really about. The *kavanah* (concentration) of people praying together aids each individual in connecting to G-d instead of being distracted. Second, that there was no need for me to see into the men's section. Hearing sufficed, allowing me to follow the prayers. On our side of the *mechitza*, we were a band of women, praying and swaying together to heartfelt requests. There was deep joy at the New Year and profound gratitude for the chance to renew ourselves. The main event was right where we were!

Every year since that Rosh Hashana in Manchester, I have tried to recapture that profound connection. That experience informed my future choices and permanently changed the view that I had both of Orthodoxy and of feminism.

I hope you experience this too.

Ilana Freedman is mother of four boys, Rebbetzin of Northwood United Synagogue and teacher of Biology at Hasmonean High School, London UK. She loves halacha and science and occasionally plays electric guitar.



ROSH HASHANA AND YOM KIPPUR SERVICES WERE THE BEST TIMES TO CATCH UP WITH OLD FRIENDS.

DISCOVERING YOM KIPPUR (cont. from p. 2)... They are completely pure, without physical inclinations, and are always in tune with G-d's will. On Yom Kippur, we try to be like *mal'achim* because it is our day to reconnect with G-d and have a direct line straight up that will not be dropped, hit a dead zone or get fuzzy, just like the *mal'achim* have.

How do we accomplish this? The main way we imitate *mal'achim* on Yom Kippur is by abstaining from the physical--by fasting, not having intimate relations, and not wearing leather shoes. In addition, men wear white *kittels* (special robes) and many women wear white, as well, and do not wear jewelry or makeup. We strip down to the spiritual and focus on our relationship with G-d.

It might be easy to be skeptical about this idea. Even if we can understand it intellectually, when it comes to hour 20 of fasting, the feelings of hunger usually end up overriding the spiritual. However, the reason I can write about this concept of imitating *mal'achim* and connecting with G-d is because I experienced it.

After college, I spent 10 months in a religious seminary, learning all about Judaism, including learning about Yom Kippur. We had what's called a *Yom Iyun* (a whole day of intensive learning) specifically about Yom Kippur. We went through all the different parts of the service so we would be able to participate properly, including when to stand, sit and bow. Having become aware of these technical cues alone, I was already feeling more prepared.

After learning about the service, we learned about the significance of emulating the *mal'achim*:

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are collectively called the "Days of Awe." On Yom Kippur, the judgment that was rendered on Rosh Hashana of who is "written" in the Book of Life, is sealed for the year. It is on this final Day of Awe that we want to present our truest selves to G-d--that part of ourselves that desires to connect to G-d, to reach our potential and to fulfill our purpose in this world. This is how G-d created us. In a sense, our truest self wants to be like an angel. But, this aspect is usually overshadowed by our more physical self. In order to help us reveal our truest self to G-d on Yom Kippur, we imitate *mal'achim*, which means we need to lose the physical. This transformation completely changes the intention behind the fast! It is not a means of punishment for all of the sins that we are confessing, rather it is a way for us to connect to our truest self and present that new person to G-d for final judgment. When we recite *viduy* (the confessional), we are not punishing ourselves for all of the things we did wrong, instead we are admitting them to both ourselves and to G-d, apologizing for them, and promising to try and do better the next time.

(cont. on p. 4)



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DISCOVERING YOM KIPPUR (cont. from p. 3)...

Keeping this new understanding in mind that year, I went into Yom Kippur excited and ready. Surrounded by my teachers and friends, dressed in a white flowing skirt, no make-up, no jewelry - I was ready to be an angel. Lo and behold it worked! That Yom Kippur, I had an endless stream-of-consciousness straight from my heart, through my mouth and up to G-d. I felt my connection to G-d so strongly that I didn't even leave the synagogue in between the morning and afternoon services. I didn't want the "phone call" to end. The most surprising part was how easy the fast became. Tapped into your true self and sharing that with G-d took me beyond the need for food. This experience truly strengthened my relationship with myself and with G-d.

After that year, Yom Kippur became one of my favorite Jewish holidays. This is not because it is the hardest, but because it rejuvenates me and my relationship with G-d. Yom Kippur prepares me for the new year that is just starting.

This Yom Kippur, may we all be like the *mal'achim*, striving to show our truest selves to G-d and begin the new year renewed and connected.

Tips for enjoying Yom Kippur:

1. Prepare: The month before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is a special time to reflect on the past year, prepare for the fall holidays, and set goals for the upcoming year. Take advantage of this time--go through the *machzor* (special prayer book for the holidays) and write notes, ideas, and thoughts on

the margins of the pages. Get a translation of the *viduy* (confessional) prayer. The *viduy* is the meat of the Yom Kippur service, understanding this and thinking of examples from your own life for each of the lines is one of the best ways to make the prayers more meaningful. And don't forget you can always add your own personal prayers.

2. Pick the right synagogue for you: There are many different kinds of prayer services out there. Make sure you find a synagogue where you are comfortable, where you like the speed, the amount of singing and the Rabbi. I like to go to a synagogue where I know people, but it could be that you prefer to go to a synagogue where you don't know anyone so you can completely focus on your prayers.

3. Wear white: Although you don't have to, I personally feel more pure and angelic when I'm wearing white. I also make sure that whatever I'm wearing is comfortable, since it is a long day.

4. Drink lots of water the day before: This is good advice for any fast day, but especially a 25 hour fast.

5. Remember to be your true self: Remember Yom Kippur is not the day of punishment, it is the day on which you can be your true self – and that is what G-d is judging.

Katie Landy, originally from Massachusetts, currently lives in Highland Park, NJ, after graduating from Rutgers University in 2012 and spending a year in Israel. She is now pursuing a PhD from Mount Sinai Graduate School in the field of genetics.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn