



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

High Holidays > Short Insights

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ABSTRACT

These short insights, vignettes, anecdotes and stories contain bits of inspirational material to be interspersed among the long prayers of the High Holidays in order to engage, stimulate and inspire the audience. Some are appropriate for both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. When they are holiday-specific, you will find (RH) or (YK) in the title, and if they are applicable to both, you will find (RH/YK).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Knowing Your Destination (RH) – What a prisoner in a Siberian gulag learned from a tightrope walker about keeping the end-goal in mind.
2. Cosmic Nervous System (RH) – Rosh Hashana ushers in the Hebrew month of *Tishrei* with all its many holidays, which are the main energy centers – the cosmic nervous system – controlling the entire year.
3. Blind Spots (RH) – Why do we need an outside force – a shofar – to wake us up on Rosh Hashana? Why can we not rely on our own cries and prayers?
4. The Sounds of the Shofar (RH) – An explanation of the psycho-spiritual meaning behind the three sounds of the shofar.
5. Shofar in Spain (RH) – Chief Rabbi Metzger’s story of presenting a shofar to the King of Spain and telling him of a Shofar Concerto that took place during the Inquisition.
6. Shofar in Auschwitz (RH) – A moving story of how one rabbi risked his life to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashana in the death block of Auschwitz.
7. Coronation Night (RH) – Rabbi Soloveitchik’s recollection of the most inspirational Rosh Hashana message he ever heard.
8. A Marriage Made in Heaven (RH) – God said, “It’s not good for man to be alone.” And He created a helpmate *against* him. Was God fond of oxymorons or did He have Himself in mind?

9. Lord of the Ants (RH) - God wants to be our sovereign only if we so choose.
10. Finding the Way Together (RH) - Excellent introduction for sharing. Do we know where we are running to? Or are we lost?
11. Your People (RH/YK) - How could a scared Holocaust survivor, who did not know whom he could trust in Eastern Europe after the war, recognize a fellow Jew? By a secret codeword.
12. Tale of Two Lambs (RH/YK) - What single Torah verse captures the essence of Judaism. Clue: You'll never guess.
13. When God is a Mentch (RH/YK) - No mentch would testify against his kin; how could God be any different.
14. Boring Prayers (RH/YK) - Jokes are told about how boring High Holiday prayers are. But they don't need to be if we rediscover the spontaneity of prayer and find purpose in the structure.
15. Yusta, the Tailor (RH/YK) - The High Holidays are a time to reflect on whether our life's successes and pressures have robbed us of our humanness and realness.
16. Blessing the Children (YK) - How the Klausenberger Rebbe, who lost eleven children in the Holocaust, blessed orphaned girls before the start of Yom Kippur 1945.
17. The Lost Child (YK) - A moving story about a Russian soldier who carried his parents' loving message without knowing what it was.
18. Your Inner Child (YK) - Even the most cynical person has a pure side. Yom Kippur teaches us the most vital message: Never give up on your self. Despite life's difficulties - your inner child always remains intact.
19. Returning to Your Essence (YK) - On Yom Kippur we are assured that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* reverse the evil decree. A brief explanation of the meaning of *teshuvah*.
20. Sensitivity in Action (YK) - On Yom Kippur we are assured that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* reverse the evil decree. A brief explanation of the meaning of *tzedakah*.

21. Day of Unlimited Possibilities (YK) – A Kabbalistic insight into the power of oneness that descends on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.

22. *Yizkor* after the Holocaust (YK) – “Our loved ones did not go to their graves in white. Let’s be like them!” cried the Klausenberger Rebbe as he ripped off his white kittel.

23. The Ten Martyrs (YK) – A moving explanation of the section of Yom Kippur liturgy which describes the torture of ten sages.

24. The Power of Neilah (YK) – How one Yom Kippur stopped Franz Rosenzweig, an influential Jewish theologian and philosopher in Germany, from converting to Christianity.

25. GPS: God’s Positioning System (YK) – Humorous analogy between the GPS and the Torah.

1. Knowing Your Destination (RH)

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas, who spent many years in a Siberian gulag, tells how he learned a great lesson from a tightrope walker who was also imprisoned there.

The rabbi asked the tightrope walker about the secret of his art. “What does one need to master? Balance? Stamina? Concentration?”

The tightrope walker’s answer surprised him: “The secret is always keeping your destination in focus. You have to keep your eyes on the other end of the rope. But do you know what the hardest part is?”

“When you get to the middle?” the rabbi ventured.

“No,” said the tightrope walker. “It’s when you make the turn. Because for a fraction of a second, you lose sight of your destination. When you don’t have sight of your destination that is when you are most likely to fall.”

Life is something like a tightrope. To navigate it successfully you must have your destination in focus. You must know where you are going. When the time comes to make a turn, and for a moment you cannot see where you are headed, you have to have your destination in your mind's eye.

The ultimate destination – the final goal of all human efforts throughout history – is called Redemption (*geula*) when the world will realize its purpose and reach ultimate refinement. This is when we say, quoting the famous words of the Prophet Isaiah, that “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... when nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares ... and know war no more.”¹

Redemption is not a destination you can see by looking in front of you, you can only see it by looking inside you. That is real focus.

Real focus is not physical, it is transcendental. Real focus is your relationship with your life's mission. If it is clear and well developed, it will guide you past the moments of danger, and keep you moving with confidence even in times of greatest fear and darkness.

Rosh Hashana is the time to adjust the focus so it is crystal clear. It is a time to decide where you are headed in the coming year and how you will arrive there. Now is the time to begin.

2. Cosmic Nervous System (RH)

Rosh Hashana ushers in the Hebrew month of *Tishrei* with all its holidays, which are the main energy centers – the cosmic nervous system – controlling the entire year.

Tishrei is the first month of the year, the top of the year, and it is packed with holidays just the head is packed with more functions than any other body part. In addition to controlling the functions and movement of the body, the head controls the senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch) as well as our chief mode of expression (speech) – all of which are vested in the organs of the head (eyes, ears, mouth, nose).

Relatively speaking, it seems disproportionate that the head should have gotten so much. And it seems disproportionate that *Tishrei* should have gotten such an abundance of holidays.

But if we consider that, in Jewish thought, a human being is seen as a universe in microcosm, and that which exists within the human being is also paralleled in time and space, then we see that what is true of the human head must also be true of the head of year.

Packed as it is with holidays, *Tishrei* generates the spiritual energy necessary for the work of perfecting the world which it initiates. In the first five days of creation, God had created a stationary world, and on the sixth day – the first day of *Tishrei* (which is Rosh Hashana), He created humanity to complete the work. He had started by turning the world into a dynamic universe filled with meaning and higher purpose.

Thus *Tishrei* is a month that initiates and energizes the work of *tikkun* – repairing the world. It presents the finest opportunity to repair, realign and rebuild our fundamental psycho-spiritual structure both on a personal and cosmic level. And since a human being is a universe in microcosm, we include in ourselves the entire world. When we repair ourselves, we repair the world.

The stakes are high. How we behave on the first few days of *Tishrei* determines our destiny for the year ahead.

3. Blind Spots (RH)

Why do we need an outside force – a *shofar* – to wake us up on Rosh Hashana? Why can we not rely on our own cries and prayers?

The Talmud says: “A person in fetters cannot free himself.” All our words, prayers and cries cannot free us from our own trappings. The call of a *shofar* from outside of us can unbind and lift us to unprecedented heights.

We all have our blind spots. And to be perfectly clear, a blind spot means that you cannot see your blind spot. Not like the fellow who tells

his therapist: "Of course I have blind spots. But I know what they are...
" Or the doctor who tells his skeptical patient: "I'll tell you when you need a second opinion."

Sometimes our blind spots extend to those we love. We simply see them as perfect. As in this dialogue between a fawning parent and a skeptic:

Parent: I have the perfect son.

Skeptic: Does he smoke?

Parent: No, he doesn't.

Skeptic: Does he drink whiskey?

Parent: No, he doesn't.

Skeptic: Does he ever come home late?

Parent: No, he doesn't.

Skeptic: I guess you really do have the perfect son. How old is he?

Parent: He will be six months old next Wednesday.

Rosh Hashana reminds us that to truly grow we must know how small we are and how great we can become. We must acknowledge our subjectivity and blind spots if we ever hope to get beyond them.

Therefore, we don't simply rely on our tools to free ourselves from our fetters. We take a *shofar* - a ram's horn - that produces a sound we cannot produce on our own, and allow it to reach into our hearts and souls, piercing the heavens and lifting us to a place we could not reach on our own. But once the sound emerges, it resonates and awakens deeper resources that lay embedded in our psyches - freeing our souls and allowing them to soar.

4. The Sounds of the Shofar (RH)

Many reasons are given why the *shofar* is sounded on Rosh Hashana. Among them:

1) The *shofar* imitates the sounds of trumpets which are typically sounded at the coronation of a king. And on Rosh Hashana, when God renews the creation of the universe and His kingship over it, we crown Him as our king.

- 2) The *shofar*'s heart-piercing sound moves us to repentance.
- 3) The *shofar* reminds us of the encounter with God at Mount Sinai when the *shofar* was also sounded before the Ten Commandments were given.
- 4) The sound of the *shofar* reminds us of the upcoming Day of Judgment.
- 5) The sound of the *shofar* has the power to awaken awe in our hearts.

Maimonides writes poetically of the *shofar* as a wake-up call:

Although blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashana is a divine decree, it contains a hidden message. Namely: "Slumberers, arise from your sleep. Wake up from your deep slumber, you who are fast asleep. Inspect your actions. Repent. Remember your Creator. Those of you who have forgotten the truth because of daily trivia. Those of you who indulge in useless things that cannot profit nor save you. All of you look into your souls. Mend your ways and deeds."

Before the *shofar* is sounded, various verses are recited. The most famous among them is from Psalm 118: "From my narrow place, from my depths and constraints, I call to You, and you respond to me from Your expansive place."² This verse captures the distress of the soul which feels limited by the "narrow straits" of life and its hardships. And precisely because the soul's cry is so profound, it reaches the widest expanses of heaven.

The *shofar* is meant to mirror the soul's cry:

The long unbroken note of the *tekiah* (preceding the other sounds) reflects the simple cry of the soul from its depths. The three broken notes, the drawn out sobs of the *shevarim* are the sighs of a broken heart, gasping for hope. The short outbursts of the *teruah* is the sobbing soul eliciting compassion.

The final drawn out blast of the *tekiah gedolah*, following the other sounds, expresses the confidence that we have triumphed and God responds from the wide expanses above.

Let us remember that as we hear it now.

5. Shofar in Spain (RH)

The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yonah Metzger, related the following episode:

King Juan Carlos of Spain invited me to organize a commemoration of the 800th anniversary of the passing of Maimonides, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, better known as the Rambam. Born in Spain, the Rambam spent most of his adult life as a physician living and working in Egypt, where he authored his famous summaries of Jewish law and his profound writings on Jewish philosophy.

When I arrived in Spain, I presented the king with the gift of a very special *shofar* – it was long and curved, and part of it was covered in silver and adorned with images of a crown, the Wailing Wall, and a menorah.

When King Juan Carlos saw the *shofar*, he didn't understand its significance. "Is it from Africa?" he asked.

"No, it's from the Land of Israel," I replied. The king thought that perhaps it was used to play torero, a traditional sport involving the deadly pursuit of bulls through the streets of Spain. I explained that Judaism is against such games because of the commandment of *tzar baalei chayim*, the prohibition of causing pain to animals. "So what is the meaning of this present?" the king inquired.

And this is how I answered him:

Dear King of Spain, today with this gift I close a very old circle. More than 500 years ago, your great-great-grandfathers expelled my forefathers from Spain. Many Jews remained in Spain, and in order to avoid persecution they became *marranos*, secret Jews who behaved on the outside as Christians but in private as Jews. The *maaranos* made many small gatherings in underground synagogues, and they prayed very quietly. Once a year on Rosh Hashana, they were faced with a dilemma: How could they blow the *shofar* and remain undetected? But if they did not blow it, how could fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the *shofar* if no one could hear it?

So one year, a marrano who was the conductor of the orchestra of your

great grandfather, approached the king and suggested that he arrange a special concert with old wind instruments. Being very fond of music, the king was delighted at such a novel idea, and he instructed the conductor to reserve the largest theatre in Spain. The king told him to speak to his secretary and set a date for the concert. The conductor ran to the secretary and told him, "Please, I want a specific day in September." That day was Rosh Hashana.

At the concert, the king, the queen, the royal children, and the ministers sat in the front rows, and behind them sat hundreds of *marranos* who came to hear the concert on Rosh Hashana. The conductor held up the *shofar* and explained: "Dear King. Before you expelled the Jewish people from your country they used to blow this instrument, the *shofar*, as a sign of the first day of their calendar year. Before they used this instrument they used to say the following: *Baruch atah Hashem Elokeinu Melech HaOlam asher kidishanu bimitzvotav vitzivenu lishmoa kol shofar ... She-hechyanu vkiyimanu v'higyanu lezman hazeh*. Meaning, Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to hear the sound of the *shofar* ... Who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion." And all the *marranos*, the secret Jews, answered quietly, "Amen."

And the *marrano* proceeded with the concert...

Today, dear king, over 500 years later, I am very happy as Chief Rabbi of Israel to bring you back this *shofar*. But now I can do so overtly, not covertly, because you treat my brothers with democracy. Here in Spain everyone can pray, build synagogues, and blow the *shofar*. And everything that a Jew can do today in Spain is because of you, the king.

The king looked at the *shofar* and said, "Dear Rabbi, you see around me many gifts from all over the world, but I think that this gift contains the greatest historical significance."

Even in their worst times in Spain, the Jewish people found ways how to blow the *shofar*. Today, the powers of the Inquisition are gone, but the sound of the *shofar* still resonates.

6. Shofar in Auschwitz

The Hungarian Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels³ related this experience of Rosh Hashana 1944 in Auschwitz, six months before the end of the World War II:

I managed miraculously to smuggle a *shofar* into the camp. On the first day of Rosh Hashana I went from block to block, blowing it. I had to avoid the SS guards and the Jewish kappos who might inform on me. It was a miracle that I succeeded. I was privileged to sound the *shofar* that Rosh Hashana some twenty times. This revived the shattered spirits of the camp inmates and gave them some peace of mind knowing that at least they could observe this one mitzvah in Auschwitz – hearing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashana.

But about one thousand souls were selected out that day to leave Auschwitz for a destination unknown. Because of the preparations for the trip and the confusion, they could not hear the *shofar*. They were gathered together at the edge of the camp near the gate, ready and waiting to leave. When I reached them, I told them I had a *shofar* with me, and they begged me to blow it quickly so they could fulfill the mitzvah before the gate opened, and they would be on their way to who knows where.

I can still hear reverberating in my ears the sobs that burst forth from those thousand people when I blew the *shofar*. I especially remember the trembling voice of the well-known hassid from Debrecen who announced the sounds. He was Rabbi Yehoshua Fleischman, may God avenge his blood.

Then I found out that there was another group of young boys who were locked in the death block, about to be sent to the gas-chambers. They found out that I had a *shofar*. I heard shouts and entreaties emanating from their block imploring me to come to them, so they could fulfill this precious mitzvah on Rosh Hashana in their last moments of life, before they would be gassed and burnt.

To do this was extremely risky since it was nearing twilight, a dangerous hour, and the Nazis would be coming to take them. If the Nazis

were to suddenly show up while I was blowing the *shofar*, no doubt they would take me to the gas chambers as well.

I stood there trying to decide what to do. But their pleading was heart-wrenching. "Rebbe, Rebbe! Please, have pity on our souls. We beg you. Let us hear the *shofar* in our last moments." I stood there immobile. I was all alone in my decision.

My dear son Zalman Leib stood next to me, and he too entreated me with bitter sobs. "Father, father! Don't do this and endanger yourself because this may turn me into an orphan, and leave me stranded and alone. Father, father! Don't go. You aren't obligated to take the risk. You already blew the *shofar* so many times, and each time you risked your life. You have done more than enough." When I gazed at my son, pity and compassion welled up in me, and I saw that he was correct.

But the wailing of the boys gave me no peace and aroused in my heart tremendous compassion for them. Maybe this mitzvah would give them some protection ... I was so torn ...

I reached a decision. I could not turn the boys down. [The kappos let me into the block where the boys were locked in.] I told my son to stand outside and watch. If he saw the S.S. men coming he was to run and alert me immediately, so I had a chance to escape.

I entered the room. It is a miracle that my heart was not splintered into pieces when I saw the dozens of youthful eyes and heard their terrible sobbing. They pushed to reach me, to kiss my hand, to touch my clothes. All the time bewailing, "Rebbe! Rebbe!"

Some of them were my students, and others were from my town. When I began to recite the prayer preceding the *shofar* blowing, they interrupted me, insisting on few last words of inspiration. I was so stunned and moved that I was mute, my tongue clung to my palate, and I could not open my mouth. I was also afraid that if there were any further delay this window of opportunity would be closed. Dusk would soon settle and the ensuing danger would be great.

But imagine ... Jewish youth from Hungry, locked up in a block, waiting

to be sent to die, requesting to hear words of inspiration, on Rosh Hashana ... How could I say no.

I acquiesced to their pleading. I spoke about the verse in Psalm 81 which is recited on Rosh Hashana "Blow the *shofar* at the moon's renewal." I told them that Rosh Hashana is the only holiday in the Jewish calendar which takes place on the first day of the month, when we can't see the moon. We blow the *shofar* when the moon is still eclipsed, still concealed, when all the light is covered by dense darkness, when God is most hidden from us. And this is when we blow the *shofar*. This is when we hold onto the voice of Sinai, the voice of hope.

After that, I sounded the *shofar*. As I was leaving, one of the boys uttered a loud cry, "Friends, the Rebbe gave us encouragement!" The others responded amidst their tears with a resounding *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad...*

Soon after these precious boys were taken to the gas chambers. How I wish I could embrace them all right here and now.

And when I lift up this *shofar* I feel that, in a certain sense, I am embracing, hugging and kissing, each one of those holy boys who were cut down in the most promising years of their life. I feel like I am holding onto this *shofar* for them. They never had children. We are their heirs and we can't let this *shofar*, their *shofar* - filled with hope, faith, Jewish pride and dignity - go silent today.

7. Coronation Night (RH)

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soleveitchik, one of the great Jewish thinkers of the last century, once related that, when he was seven years old, he learned in cheder (Jewish day school), in the Russian village of Chaslavitch. And that, in the days preceding Rosh Hashana, he recognized in his teacher an extraordinary sense of trepidation.

The teacher asked the students: "Do you know what Rosh Hashana is? It is *Karanatzia Nacht* (Coronation Night). And do you know whom we will be coronating?"

The young Soloveitchik, trying to be funny, responded, “Nicholas.” (This was a number of years before the 1917 Russian Revolution, when Nicholas still was the Russian czar).

The poor teacher was aghast at the answer: “Nicholas? He was coronated years ago, why do we need to coronate him again? Besides, he is not a real king ... On Rosh Hashana, my dear children, we coronate God; we place a crown on God’s head. And do you know who gets to do it? Yankel the Tailor, Berel the Shoemaker, Zalman the water-carrier, Yossel the painter, Dovid the butcher...”

Relating the story, Rabbi Soloveitchik concluded: “Over the years I have given many sermons and written many discourses on the concept of Rosh Hashana, but nothing ever made me feel the true depth and power of the day as the words of my childhood teacher. Every year, when I recite in the Rosh Hashana prayers the words, ‘Rule over the whole world in Your glory,’ I remember my teacher in Chaslavitch.

How much of Judaism is compressed in this brief conversation between teacher and students? In a few words, a poverty-stricken Jewish teacher in a small shtetl in Russia gave his seven-year-old students the core, the essence, the very marrow of Jewish thought.

God, the perfect endless one, desired to be king not through power or by the dictates of nature. He desired to be *chosen* as king by simple people. He wanted a relationship with someone distinct from Him who would freely choose to construct a bond with a Him.

So, every year, an infinite, omnipotent God suspends His infinity, suppresses His endlessness and conceals His omnipotence, in order to allow space for an intelligent, independent and self-oriented human being who is capable of choosing God as his or her king.

This, the Jewish spiritual masters have explained, is the meaning of Rosh Hashana, the day when we human beings were first created. And it is a day when we – small, frail, vulnerable and lowly as we are – invite God to be our king.

Of course, God could place His own crown on His head, but then He would be a dictator, not a king – the relationship would be coerced not

chosen. So God waits all year for this great moment for which the entire universe was created – the moment when you and I coronate him as our king.

Rosh Hashana is the most moving day in the Jewish calendar. More than any other day, it embodies the meaning of human existence and the vulnerability of a God who linked His fate to man's.

Happy Coronation Night.

8. A Marriage Made in Heaven (RH)

It is famously said that the month of preparation for the High Holidays – the Hebrew month of Elul – is an acronym for a verse in King Solomon's erotic "Song of Songs": *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, "I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me." That is, Elul is a month when we seek to come close to God, our beloved.

This concept is part of the greater metaphorical allusion in Jewish literature to God as the "husband" and Israel as the "wife." And, as in most marriages, there are bound to be good time and bad, arguments and reconciliations.

Like the fellow told his friend: "When we got engaged, I did all the talking and she did all the listening. Later, when we first got married, she did all of the talking and I did all the listening. Now, ten years later, we both do all the talking and the neighbors do all the listening."

Differing points of view are part of the innate structure of the marriage relationship. After all, when God created Eve, He announced, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper *against* him."

Now, at first glance the phrase "a helper against him" seems like an oxymoron. A helper is by definition someone who works for you, no? So how can someone at war with you, be a helper?

Much has been written to explain the meaning of this verse. One 18th century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, interprets the

sentence literally: The woman helps her husband by sometimes being against him. What this may mean is that for a husband to become the maximum he can be, he must have the courage to welcome the ideas and feelings of his spouse that are against his own.

Some men cannot tolerate their wives disagreeing with them. They grow angry and frustrated, at times even yelling at their wives for daring to challenge their “sacred” views. What often transpires as a result is that the woman, in order to maintain a peaceful atmosphere in the home, remains silent or even removed.

Who loses the most? It is the husband. Frankly, a man at times must be saved from himself, from his ego, his insecurities, blind spots, rashness and temptations.

When a man learns to genuinely embrace his wife’s contrasting personality and her otherness, he will travel to places he could never reach on his own.

This does not mean, of course, that it is a biblical injunction upon every woman to disagree with her husband all the time.

A man once asked, if he stated an opinion alone in a forest away from his wife, would he still be wrong?

What it does mean, though, is that it is unproductive and unhealthy when a man creates a climate in the home in which his wife must always agree with his opinions, answering “Amen” to all his declarations.

Now what does this tell us about our relationship with God?

When God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper against him,” He was speaking symbolically about Himself. Prior to creating the universe, God was “alone” so to speak. In truth, that did not change immediately upon creation, because the entire universe is essentially an extension of His light and energy. But then God created humanity - an event we celebrate on Rosh Hashana - He chose to eclipse His own reality so completely that we could oppose Him, that we could even act against Him. God created us human beings with the ability to deny Him, ignore Him, to expel Him from our lives, to divorce Him. And yet He still loves us.

A nurse shared this story:

It was a busy morning when, at 8:30 a.m. an elderly gentleman arrived at her clinic, asking she remove the sutures from his thumb. He stated that he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 a.m. She tried to oblige him though it was clear he would not make it on time. As she was taking care of his wound, the nurse asked the elderly gentleman where he was going in such a rush. "I need to get to the nursing home to eat breakfast with my wife." Politely, the nurse inquired about the wife's health, only to learn that the wife was a victim of Alzheimer's Disease. The nurse apologized that the wife would be kept waiting. "That's all right," the man said, "She no longer knows who I am. In fact, she hasn't recognized me in five years." The nurse was astonished. "And yet you still go there every morning to have breakfast with her?" He smiled. "She doesn't know who I am, but I still know who she is." And that is how God relates to us. When we turn away from Him, refusing to acknowledge Him, He is still there for us - at breakfast, lunch and dinner and all the times in between. Why?

Why does God care so much? And why does He let us forget about Him at times?

The answer is hidden in the statement: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper against him."

What this means symbolically is that God's profoundest pleasure comes from the paradoxical state of things - that though we can turn away from Him, we choose to turn to Him.

When we, human beings - who by our very nature feel absolutely detached from God - crack the shell of our physicality to discover the divine light within, when we challenge the coarseness of our nature to find the tiny flame of idealism etched in the recesses of our hearts, this gives God pleasure and joy that He could not have experienced otherwise.

The purpose of our creation, in other words, was not to *generate* light, but to discover light within ourselves, and by so doing, transform darkness of this earth into the light of heaven.

So the next time your spouse disagrees with you, or the next time you disagree with God – don't get frustrated. On the contrary, this is an opportunity for you to experience the ultimate *raison d'etre* of your marriage whether earthly or heavenly.

9. Lord of the Ants (RH)

After searching for many years, the lion finally got married. He invited to the wedding all of the animals in the jungle. At the ceremony all of the animals went over to greet the groom and wish him well. The ant, too, came and approached the lion and said: "Brother! Mazal Tov!"

The lion looked at the ant and said: "I don't understand why you call me 'brother,' when you know that I am a huge lion and you are a tiny ant and with one breath I can destroy you. I am the king of the jungle!"

And the ant responded with much compassion in his eyes: "Yes, I know what you mean brother. Before I got married I also believed I was the king..."

The theme of Rosh Hashana is captured in the Talmud:⁴ "God says to the Jewish people, coronate me as your king ... with the *shofar*."

What is the point of us crowning God as king? Does God need *us* to make Him a king? If a little Jew says, "I disagree, I have another candidate for the throne" does it makes a difference?

Good question. Here is the answer from the 18th century Hassidic Master known as the Alter Rebbe:

Imagine if you decide you want to be a king with full power and control. So what do you do? You gather thousands of ants and you declare to them that from today you are their king. You take your scepter and begin issuing forth orders to your subjects: "Go right, go left, go straight. Jump, sit, run, eat, bow down to me." And if one of the ants refuses your orders, you just step on him and squash him. Then you come home and tell your wife: I am a king!

It is ridiculous, of course. You can't be a king over ants, because they are naturally subservient to you. With one step you can kill hundreds of them. They are, by the very laws of nature, subservient to you. They can't choose to designate you as their king; such is the nature of their reality. You are more powerful than they.

Kingship only applies *if* your subjects are on your level and therefore can appoint you as their leader. You can't be a king over ants just like you can't be a king over your computer or your car. These are inanimate objects totally not in your realm to even define them as your subjects.

A shepherd who drives a herd of a thousand sheep is not a king. A tyrant who rules an empire of a million terrified subjects is not a king. A true sovereign is one whose subjects *choose* him as their king.

So can God be our king, when we are like ants, and He gives us our life every moment? It's not real kingship or real power if God creates us and then says: "Ah, now I will be their king!"

Of course God - being God - knew this and so He ordered the world He created in a very different way. He created us human beings - creatures endowed with free choice who can then choose to build a relationship with the Creator, who can choose to make Him their king ... or not.

Only we can turn God into a real king! And every time we say *Melech HaOlam* ("King of the Universe") it means something. It means that we choose to recognize God as our sovereign.

Rosh Hashana is the sixth day of creation, the day on which humanity was created. By then, God had already created the heavens and the earth, animals and angels. He had already presided over a world that submitted to His rule, over creatures who feared and loved Him and appreciated His wisdom. Then God created us, giving us the freedom to chose or reject Him.

Each year on Rosh Hashana God asks of us to make Him king. It is the only thing He can't do on His own. For only we can turn God into a real king over His creation.

And we have gathered here to do just that.

Each year on Rosh Hashana, a piercing sound rises from the earth and reverberates through the heavens. It is the sound of the *shofar*. It is an utterly simple cry, the simple trumpet-like sound of a nation crowning its king.

10. Finding the Way Together (RH)

[This is a good intro to taking questions or asking people to share.]

You might remember the famous statement made by the head of the Communist Party while he was trying to galvanize party members for the next big push: “Comrades, yesterday we all stood collectively at the edge of the abyss. But today we take a giant step forward.”

On Rosh Hashana – the Day of Judgment – when we stand poised at the edge of the New Year and about to take a step forward into the future, are we fearful what the coming year will bring? More financial pressure, more emotional stress, more anxiety and fear?

Sometimes we all feel like we spend our days running – whether literally or figuratively – and fall into a restless sleep knowing tomorrow we will have to run that much faster. We are running all the time, and we can’t run fast enough. The question is where are we running? What is our destination? How do we know that we are not speeding toward the edge of the abyss?

Israeli General Moshe Dayan was once stopped by a policeman for speeding. Blind in one eye, and wearing a patch, Dayan asked the officer, “I have only one eye. What do you want me to watch, the speedometer or the road?”

Do we have our eyes on the road? Do we know where that road is headed? Do we know where we will arrive a year from now?

A long time ago, a man who had been wandering through a forest, not knowing the right way out, found himself at nightfall enveloped in the

darkness of the woods. He was alone, frightened, and lost and then suddenly he saw a glimmer of light in the distance. His heart grew lighter as he caught sight of another traveler carrying a lantern. As the other man came near, he approached him excitedly, "Please tell me, which is the right way out of the woods. I've been roaming about this forest and am completely lost."

The man with the lantern said to him, "My friend, I do not know the way out, for I too am lost. But one thing I can tell you, do not take the way I came. That way is not the way, for it will lead you astray." And then he said, "Take my hand. Let us look for a new way together."

So we come together on Rosh Hashana to hold hands and search for a new way - together. We may be confused, lost and fearful of the future. We may not have any answers to the many questions, but if we hold each other's hands, we will find a way together.

11. Your People (RH/YK)

Leibel Zisman was just was just 14 years old when he was liberated by American troops from Gunskirchen, the concentration camp which he reached barely alive on a death march from Mauthausen. He was housed in relative comfort at a DP camp under American control, but he was bereft. He had no news that any of his family had survived. Still, he hoped ... He had seen his father and youngest brother taken away back in the Kovno Ghetto, and he knew there was no chance that they were still alive. But maybe his mother who was taken off the cattle train at Stutthof, or maybe his brother whom the train left off at Landsberg. Maybe tomorrow ... maybe tomorrow he would see a name he recognized on a survivors' list ...

Everyone else was in a similar predicament. And the general consensus seemed to be that it was best to return to your place of origin - to your family home. If your relatives survived, that's where they would go too.

So Leibel moved from the American DP camp to the Russian DP camp, from where he awaited a train that would take him back to Lithuania, to Kovno.

Finally, after a long wait, such a train was organized, and the Lithuanian Jews eagerly hopped on board. But traveling was a long drawn-out affair, because anytime the Russians needed a locomotive, they moved the passenger train to a side track and left it sitting there. Leibel noticed that the trains that were passing by were transporting all kinds of machinery on open flat-bed cargo cars. The Russians seemed to be dismantling factories and industrial plants in Germany and shipping all that equipment home. And that's why they needed the locomotives.

On one such prolonged stop, the train was parked somewhere in Hungary under the watchful eye of Russian soldiers. The Jews were not allowed to go into town, but they were allowed to get off the train and stretch their legs.

As Leibel was doing just that, he saw two young men who were very well dressed in suits and ties. To Leibel, they had Jewish faces. But he was not sure. Were they friend or foe? For so many years being Jewish was a curse, and Leibel feared revealing himself to anti-Semites. But there was a code – a Jewish password – by which Jews could identify each other. It was a secret word that if you said it to any Jew in Eastern Europe, he or she would know instantly that a fellow member of the tribe was speaking.

So Leibel employed this subterfuge. He asked the well-dressed young men: “*Amcho?*”

“*Amcho?*”

Amcho literally means “Your people” and we are going to be repeating it many times during the High Holiday liturgy. “Bless Your people, Israel” ... “Remember Your people, O God” ... “We are Your people and You are our God” ...

When Leibel wanted to ask the passersby “Are you Jewish?” He asked “*Amcho? Are you God's people?*”

They turned around and they said, “Yes.” So then, Leibel began speaking to them in Yiddish. He told them that he was going back to Kovno to see if anyone from his family had survived the war.

They were aghast, “Going back to the Russians? No, no. You don’t know about the Russians. We know about the Russians. Don’t trust the Russians.” They became deeply concerned about his welfare, and investigated where the train was really going. And it turned out to be Siberia!

They helped Leibel escape from the Russians by hiding him in a corn shipment, and then helped him to make his way to Budapest and eventually to Graz in Austria where he found his brother still alive.

But while this is a heart-warming story, the reason I am telling it today is ... you guessed it ... because of *Amcho*. It is a pity that Jews have abandoned this password and no longer identify each other as “God’s people.” We prefer not to be the chosen ones, we’d rather be less special and not carry the burden of responsibility that comes with. We’d rather not be the “light unto the nations” but dwell unnoticed in the shadows. We don’t want the spotlight shining too brightly on us.

But maybe this one time a year, let us reconsider. And as we pray let us say to God, “We are Your People” and let us say it with pride.

12. Tale of Two Lambs (RH/YK)

The Midrash⁵ relates a fascinating debate among Talmudic sages as to which Torah verse captures the quintessence of Judaism. Four great scholars weighed in:

Ben Azzai said his choice was the verse in the Book of Genesis which reads: “These are the chronicles of man; on the day that God created man He created him in the image of God.”⁶

Ben Zoma said it was the verse in the Book of Deuteronomy which reads: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”⁷

Ben Nanas said it was the verse in the Book of Leviticus which reads: “You shall love your neighbor like yourself.”⁸

And Shimon ben Pazi said it was the verse in the Book of Numbers which reads: “One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the second lamb you shall offer in the afternoon.”⁹

The Midrash concludes: The sages stood up on their feet and declared, “The verdict follows the opinion of Shimon ben Pazi!”

Huh? Run that by me again?

The first three opinions are logical. The notion that all of Judaism can be traced back to the idea that a human being reflects the Divine image makes perfect sense. The same can be said about the concept of a single and universal God, or the injunction to love our neighbors like ourselves. These ideas, introduced more than three millennia ago by the Torah, vividly embody the essence of Judaism and its contribution to human civilization.

But “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon”? How can that represent the timeless core of Torah? Especially when no one has offered any sacrifices for more than 2,000 years? How can one even begin to compare the message about offering two lambs with the global ideas contained in the other three options?

What is even more astonishing is that the final verdict by the sages selects this one as the winner! The noble ideas dealing with love, monotheism and human dignity, the foundations of morality and civilization, did not “make it” in the contest! Instead, we get “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon.”

The great Jewish thinker of the post-medieval period, the Maharal of Prague, offers a moving explanation.¹⁰

Shimon ben Pazi with his choice of “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon” was suggesting that what ultimately defines a Jew is unwavering consistency. Every single morning and every single afternoon you shall make an offering to your Creator. Even on the High Holidays when so much more is offered, there still is “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon.”

Of course, the declarations that reveal the philosophical depth of Torah and its grand vision for humanity – monotheism, love, human dignity – are powerful and splendid. Indeed, they were revolutionary when they first appeared. But what makes living a Jewish life unique is the unswerving commitment to live and breathe these truths day in, day out, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

One can be moved to tears by the notion of *tikkun olam*, of healing the world; one can become aflame with a burning passion toward the ideals of human dignity, love and peace. One can be inspired to make a donation, to give a speech, to shed a tear, to attend a rally, or to argue a point.

But the real and ultimate power of Judaism is that it always inspired its people to cultivate their relationship with God on a continuous basis, every day of their lives. Judaism asks the human being to make daily sacrifices for truth, for love, for peace, for God. “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon.”

During exciting days as well as monotonous days, on bright days and bleak days – “One lamb in the morning, a second lamb in the afternoon.” In the morning, when you awake, you are called to make an offering to God. In the afternoon, when your day is starting to wind down, you are called, once again, to sacrifice something of yourself for God.

Judaism is not only about a moving Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur experience or an emotional memorial ceremony. It is something the Jew lives every moment of his life. It is the dedication of ordinary people to construct, through daily ordinary acts, a fragment of heaven on planet earth.

13. When God is a Mentch (RH/YK)

The High Holidays were due to start in the synagogue of the Seer of Lublin, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, yet the great sage remained secluded in his study. Finally, one of the Seer’s disciples, Rabbi Dovid of Lelov, was dispatched on the fearful mission of knocking on his master’s door to ask what was amiss.

He found the Seer's face pale and his eyes red with weeping. "I see a terrible decree ordained in the heavenly court for the people of Israel this year," he told his disciple. "I've been praying and pleading all morning, amassing all my merits in heaven in my efforts to nullify the decree, but to no avail."

Noticing a young boy with Rabbi Dovid, the Seer asked: "Who is the lad?"

"His name is Yitzchak," said Rabbi Dovid. "He is an orphan whom I've taken into my home." (This orphan would later become Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorke, a renowned Hassidic Master in his own right.)

Much to Rabbi Dovid's surprise, the Seer engaged the boy in discussion. "What are you learning these days?" he inquired.

"We have just concluded a Talmudic section dealing with the laws of witnesses," replied the young Yitzchak.

"So, tell me an insight you've gained from this learning," prompted the Seer.

The boy said that, at first, he had been puzzled by the law that a person cannot serve as a witness in a case involving a relative of his, whether his testimony is for his relative's benefit or to his detriment. Understandably, a witness cannot be believed when he testifies in support of his relative, but why do we not accept his testimony *against* his relative? Say, a father testifies against his child. Why would you not believe him?

"Well, what answer did you find to your question?" asked the Seer.

The boy said, "The Torah is saying that only *people* are qualified to serve as witnesses. Someone who is prepared to testify against his own brother, father or child is not a *person*. He is not a *mentch*!"

The Seer lifted up his eyes upwards and said: "Father in Heaven – do you hear? Do you hear? If a father testifies against his own son, he is not *mentch*. Father in heaven! You cannot testify against your own children!"

And thus encouraged, the Seer hastened to High Holiday services.

14. Boring Prayers (RH/YK)

It is a common perception that High Holiday prayers are tedious and boring. Lots of jokes are told about this, and we laugh because it is true. Have you heard this one:

Izzy falls asleep during prayers and starts to snore. The rabbi quickly comes over to him, taps him softly on his shoulder and says, "Please stop your snoring, Izzy, you're disturbing the others." Izzy is offended. "Now look here," he retorts. "I bought my ticket, so I feel I have a right to do whatever I want." The rabbi couldn't agree more, but he pleads, "It's just that your snoring is keeping everybody else awake."

Why do we make fun of something so holy and beautiful? Yes, prayers can be boring. But if that is so, it is because we forget one critical dimension of prayer.

Before I tell you what it is and wake you all up, let me define prayer.

Now, as strange as it sounds, the very definition of prayer was a source of dispute in Talmudic times between two groups of sages led by Rabbi Jose ben Hanina and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi.¹¹ One group saw prayers as a substitute for the animal sacrifices that were offered when the Temple stood. And the other group saw prayers as meditations instituted by the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Now, let me ask you: How could the sages have had such a difference of opinion? The Patriarchs lived some 1,800 years before the Temple was finally destroyed. Did no one pray in all that time?

Of course they did. But that is not what the argument is about. The sages were not arguing about the *history* of prayer but about the *nature* of prayer. Underlying their debate is the question: Is prayer a spontaneous conversation with God, in which each person pours out his or heart (as Chana famously did in the Haftarah section we read on Rosh Hashana)? Or is prayer a formal presentation before the Almighty?

The Patriarchs, Matriarchs and their descendents prayed through the centuries as their situation demanded. And no two prayers were the

same. They spoke from the depths of their being to the One who is the depth of all being. They did not have synagogues, prayer books, sermons, Torah scrolls, liturgy, or melodies. They were shepherds for the most part, who sat with their flock in natural terrains and sang, cried, and laughed to and with God.

The sacrifices in the Temple were different. Everything about the sacrifices was subject to detailed rules and regulations. The sacrifices had their own time and place and followed a precisely defined ritual, which varied only slightly on the holidays. The priests (*kohanim*) wore a specific uniform when offering the sacrifices. And each day they did exactly the same thing.

This is at the heart of the Talmudic argument: Should prayer be spontaneous or institutionalized? Should we have text, or should we just say what is on our minds?

Both ways have merit. They speak to different aspects of the soul, and different needs of society. Without spontaneity, the spirit withers. Without structure, it lapses into chaos. Without spontaneity, prayer can be boring and irrelevant. Without structure, we can grow lazy and not even try to pray, for the structure always challenges us to go beyond ourselves and our comfort zone.

Today, as we open our prayer-books, we must be mindful more than ever of spontaneous prayer. Let us follow the text, but let us also speak to God naturally, like we would to a best friend.

Try it. Close your eyes and just talk to God in any language you want about what is in your heart.

15. Yusta, the Tailor (RH/YK)

The Midrash¹² relates the following story:

In the days of the Roman Empire, in the city of Tzipori, a town in the Upper Galilee, lived a simple man named Yusta. He served as the local tailor, sitting and sewing all day at his spot along the main street of the town.

During a visit to Rome, this simple man managed to encounter the Emperor and found favor in his eyes. As a gesture, the Emperor offered to grant Yusta any wish. The tailor asked to be appointed governor over his native city.

When Yusta, now the newly appointed governor of the city, returned to Tzipori, the townspeople began to argue: Was the new governor actually their old tailor? Some said it was Yusta, while others maintained such a thing was impossible.

One wise man suggested a simple test. While parading through the city marketplace, the new governor would pass the place where Yusta once sat and mended clothing. "If the governor turns his head to gaze at that spot, we will know that he is Yusta," said the wise man. "If he passes by without looking, we will know that he is not."

The next time the governor passed down the main street, those watching saw him turn and look at his old workplace, and everyone knew that the governor was, in fact, Yusta the tailor.

Now, a simple question comes immediately to mind: Having lived with Yusta for many years, why were the townspeople suddenly unable to recognize the face of their tailor? If they were unsure of his identity, they did not need to contrive a scheme. They could have simply asked him, or one of his entourage, who he was.

But, of course, the Midrash does not record this story just to tell a tale. It means to teach us a deeper truth.

Indeed, the debate among the townspeople concerning the identity of the new governor was *not* whether he was Yusta. Most likely, that was obvious to all who saw him. The argument involved the question of whether the new governor still possessed the fine qualities he'd once had as a simple tailor. Had the humble Yusta retained his integrity upon rising to power, or had good old Yusta been replaced by a pompous, self-centered and egocentric politician?

This explains the test suggested by the wise man. Would Yusta would look back to where he lived and worked as a simple tailor? For this is

the test of a genuine leader: Can he recall where he came from? Can he recall what was precious to him before he attained power? Can he still see himself as a simple and vulnerable human being? Can he still appreciate authentic relationships, founded on mutual honesty and transparency?

Yusta passed the test. Even as governor, he never forgot where he came from. Looking back upon that place where he once sat and sewed, he remembered his humble origins. The power did not go to his head. Even with the gift of authority, Yusta did not bid farewell to his soul.

This is the primary theme of the High Holidays. It is the time to reflect on whether our life's successes and pressures have robbed us of our humanness and realness. Have we become self-made people who worship ourselves, or can we still look deep inside to our true source in God? Are we living a life loyal to the inner rhythms of our soul, or are we busy protecting our egos and covering up our errors? In short, are we living a real life or a fake life? This is the question of the moment. Let us ponder it now.

16. Blessing the Children (YK)

It was the eve of Yom Kippur 1945, a few months after the war was over. The Klausenberger Rebbe (Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam), was staying in a DP camp in Föhrenwald) near Munich. He had lost his wife, his 11 children and most of his followers in the war. With a heavy heart he was preparing himself for this holiest day of the year. All of a sudden there was a knock on the door. A young girl came in and said, "Rebbe, I do not have a father anymore. No one will be able to bless me before Yom Kippur."

It is an ancient Jewish custom that every father blesses his children on Yom Kippur Eve right before *Kol Nidrei*. It is one of the most moving and meaningful Jewish experiences: On the holiest night of the year a father puts his hands on the heads of his *kinderlach* and blesses them.

But that year, so many children were left without parents. So this girl came to the Rebbe saying, I have no father to bless me and I want somebody to bless me.

The Rebbe put his hands on her little head, and blessed her the way a father blesses his daughter on the eve of Yom Kippur. With tears in his eyes he told her how precious she was, what a gift she was, how much he was praying for her bright future:

“May God bless you and guard you. May He shine His countenance upon you and give you grace. May He turn His face to you and grant you peace.

Five minutes later there was another knock on the door. It was another girl, again without a father, again with no one to bless her before Yom Kippur. Again the Rebbe went through the same routine. He put his hands upon her head, and he blessed her the way a father blesses his daughter:

This repeated itself again and again. The orphans kept on coming and the Rebbe attended to each of them, as though he was their father. That eve of Yom Kippur, the Rebbe blessed over eighty orphaned girls ... He placed his hands on each of them and gave them the love, the undivided attention, the confidence children yearn for so deeply.

And I want to ask you today to bless your children, to bless your loved ones. Even if they are not here today. Bless them in your heart. Bless them with all the happiness in the world, bless them with health, success, peace of mind and peace of heart. Bless them with prosperity and long life. And bless them to remember where they came from, so that they may know where they are going. Amen.

17. The Lost Child (YK)

A moving story is told by the Yiddish writer Shalom Asch, about an elderly Jewish couple in Czarist Russia who were forced to house a soldier in their home. They had to move out of their bedroom, and the young man, all gruffness and glares, moves in with his pack, rifle and bedroll.

On Friday night, the couple prepared to sit down for Shabbat dinner. The soldier also took his place at their table. He listened as the old man chanted the blessing over the wine (*Kiddush*) and the blessing over the

bread (*HaMotzi*). He quickly devoured the hunk of challah placed before him, and speaking for the first time, he asked for more. His face betrayed a sense of bewilderment. Something about this scene – the Shabbat candles burning bright, the melodies, the taste of the challah. It touched him in some mysterious way.

Finally, he rose from the table with a start, and brought out his heavy pack. He began to pull things out until, from way on the bottom he extracted a small velvet bag, tied with a drawstring. “Can you tell me, perhaps, what this is?” he asked the old man, his eyes imploring.

With trembling fingers, the old man untied the drawstring – to find inside a child’s *tallis*, a small set of *tefillin*, and a Hebrew prayer-book.

“Where did you get this? Who gave this to you?” he asked the soldier.

“I have always had it ... I don’t remember who or when...”

The old man opened the prayer book and read the inscription, his eyes filling with tears:

“To our son, Yossel, taken from us as a boy, should you ever see your Bar Mitzvah, know that your mameh and tateh always love you.”

Today, on the holiest day of the year, when we observe *Yizkor*, dedicated to the memory of our ancestors, let us try to remember their message of love to us. And if we have Jewish keepsakes that they left us, when we get home, let us remove them from storage, dust them off and display them with pride. And if we have no keepsakes, let us invest in them at the earliest opportunity. So that when we can no longer speak to our descendants they have a tangible reminder that they are Jewish, that they came from a Jewish home, and that the Nation of Israel is an eternal nation – for such is the promise of God.

18. Your Inner Child (YK)

A few days ago a good friend sent me a picture of himself as a young boy. Pure. Innocent. Beautiful. Vulnerable.

This friend had grown up in a fractured home. Estranged from abusive parents he had no keepsake from his childhood except this one. So he wanted to share a copy with me.

When I called him to acknowledge it, my friend's anguished words brought tears to my eyes. "What happened to that little boy?" he asked with resignation dripping from his words.

"I look at myself today and don't recognize that child. Not the wonder in his eyes, not the simple smile on his lips. Not his clear complexion. That small, innocent child is lost forever...".

I hung up the phone and wept. Not for the lost child, but for something far deeper: For my friend's self-induced certainty that his purity is lost, when in truth it is right there inside of him, and I, for one, am able to see it.

Was it a coincidence that this incident happened just as we are about to enter Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year?.

Yom Kippur was the only time of the year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. All year round no person ever entered this holy place. Anyone entering would not survive. Like a blinding light, the exposed spirituality of the place could not be contained and consumed all who entered.

Even when the High Priest would enter on Yom Kippur, it was only for a short while and after extensive preparations. Furthermore, he entered with a rope attached so others could drag him out if he carried any blemish and perished because of it.

What exactly is the Holy of Holies and why was it so inaccessible? What is the significance of entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur?

The mystics explain that Yom Kippur - which the Torah calls "*achas b'sheno*" (lit. "once a year") - refers to the "*achas*," the oneness and unity of the innermost dimension of the soul - *yechida sheb'nefesh*.

The soul is comprised of five dimensions, one curled into the next: The

surface level of the soul is *Nefesh* – sensory life. Layer two is *Ruach* – emotional life. Next is *Neshama* – intellectual life. Layer three is *Chaya* – transcendental life. And finally comes *Yechida* – oneness – the pure essence of the soul. *Yechida*, is the *pintele yid* – the inner dot, the purest point of your most intimate self. The inner child of innocence.

Our most tangible experiences involve the outer layers of the soul – that is, what our surface senses and basic consciousness can perceive. But our truest and most meaningful experiences are on the inner levels of the soul, the deepest of them all – on the *Yechida* level.

However, the deepest recesses of the soul are wrapped within the outer layers, which in turn are encased in the hard crust of the physical body and material universe.

This is the story of our lives. We are born pure and innocent children. Children who dream enchanted dreams, believe that everything is possible and expect the most. Vulnerable children – unpolluted and uncorrupted. Then life's challenges being to seep into our experiences. We slowly (some faster than others) learn about deceit, disappointments and unrealized expectations. As the years roll on the outer layers of our soul and the body's shell harden, innocence is lost and expectations are lowered. As we experience harsher realities many of our dreams and ideals wane, until some of us come to a point of silent resignation, distracting ourselves with outer stimulation, anything that will relieve our existential loneliness. Some of us even develop sharper tools like cynicism.

As much as we crave intimacy which resonates deep within us, the sad fact is that sensory stimulation consumes our daily lives, obfuscating our innocent essence, to the point that our inner life is most often left wanting if not plain starving.

So is there hope? Can we reach our inner child?

The answer is yes, but it is not a simple process.

Entering the souls' Holy of Holies is not a light matter. We don't enter there at will and without great care. Being the purest place in your heart

and the most intimate dimension of the soul, *Yechida* is extremely sensitive. Every subtle move, even the slightest quiver, has a dramatic impact on that most tender of places in our psyches. Observe a newborn child's' ultra sensitivity to touch and surroundings. This is why abuse that touches our intimacy, especially as young children, has such devastating consequences. By means of analogy: A strand of hair on your sleeve is harmless, but in your eye it is highly irritating. Our outer organs are protected from bacteria, but exposing our internal organs requires a highly sterilized environment. The subtler and purer the place, the greater the care necessary to preserve its pristine character.

But one day a year we are given the power to enter our Holy of Holies. And we enter with great care: We fast and suspend, as much as possible, our immersion in the material world. We spend the day in prayer and clothed in white – all to set the proper ambiance to enter the holiest place in our souls.

That one day is Yom Kippur – the day of the fifth dimension (hence, five prayers), when we celebrate *Yechida* – the one and only day in the year when each of us has the power to access our innocence. On this day you can become like the High Priest and enter your own holy of holies.

On Yom Kippur you return to your child, to your innocence, to your purest place. But this time, the innocence and exuberance of the child comes joined with the seasoning and experience of an adult. [One of the most awesome sights is to witness the fusion of adulthood and childhood. Observe an elder who still maintains the twinkle – the spunk, enthusiasm and possibilities – of youth].

And therein lays the power of Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur tells us that your child is never lost. Perhaps concealed. Maybe deeply concealed. Your child may be hiding. After your child has been hurt and disappointed, after he or she has seen how cruel people can be – your child goes into hiding. What emerges is an adult with a metal sheet of armor, an extensive and complex battery of defense mechanisms, protecting the vulnerable child from the pains of the world. Sometimes the child is so well concealed that the “mature adult”

cannot even see his own child within.

But then we are given a day like Yom Kippur, when we are able to open the doors, and peer inside. And as we do – the child within is given the power, permission and strength to peer out back to us.

Can you see your child?

Even the most cynical among (and within) us has a pure side. Even the most jaded has a moment of truth. Yom Kippur teaches us the most vital message of hope: Never give up on your self – on your inner, pure self. No matter how challenging your life has become, no matter how worn down you are, despite your bitter disappointments, losses and wounds – your inner child always remains intact.

Even if you give up on everything, never give up on that pure child that lies embedded within you. That child – the holiest part of your heart and soul – may be your last vestige of your greatest potential, and the last refuge of hope.

If nothing else – one day a year hold on to what is most dear. Give your child, your soul, a chance to speak to you.

Cherish your soul. Protect her. Nurture her tenderness. Above all, be kind to her. After all, she is you – the best of you.

As a Yom Kippur exercise to access your own innocent essence, find a childhood picture of yourself and study the photo. Then juxtapose it over your life today. Ask yourself: How far have I wandered from my own innocence? How much purity have I lost? How did I get from there to here? And how can I retrieve that purer part of myself? Ask God to help you find ways to reclaim your own innocence.

And perhaps, perhaps – as the Yom Kippur curtain closes with setting of the sun and the child goes back into hiding – your soul will feel a bit safer to show her face more often than just once a year.

19. Returning to Your Essence (YK)

On Yom Kippur we are assured that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* reverse any evil decree. Let us now look at the idea of *teshuvah*, which is translated as repentance, but which literally means returning, as in returning to God. But I would propose another definition: returning to your true self.

In the process of returning to our true selves - our divine essence - we have much to learn from the way Moses reconciled with God after the sin of the Golden Calf.

Moses did not just plead. First of all, he took action. After he broke the tablets, he punished those responsible for making the idol, he made order in the Israelite camp, and he motivated the people to repentance. After that, he demonstrated to God that he was willing to sacrifice even that which was most precious to him in order to save the relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Moses told God, "If you don't forgive their sin, then erase me, I beg you from the book which you have written."¹³ Moses broke the divine tablets - God's sacred word. He put himself on the line in order to protect the people.

For this reason he is called the Shepherd of Israel - not a scholar, warrior, orator or anything that generally distinguishes a leader, but a mild-mannered shepherd who cares about every lamb that might have strayed from the flock.

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses knew the stakes were high. Moses wanted to God to forgive the people, and in so doing demonstrate to the human race that nothing is irreversible, that there is always hope. If you make a mistake, if you err and break something, it is always possible to repair it. Resignation (or fatalism) is never an option. If you turn away from God and betray your true self, it is always possible to return through the process called *teshuvah*.

On Yom Kippur five millennia ago, Moses won this for us, and today we can always prevail even when things seem irreversibly broken.

20. Sensitivity in Action (YK)

On Yom Kippur we are assured that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* reverse any evil decree. Let us now look at the idea of *tzedakah*, which is translated as giving charity, but which literally means justice.

But I would offer another definition: sensitivity in action.

Let me tell you a story from the pages of hassidic literature:

Little Yosef Yitzchak was walking in a garden one day. Not thinking about his actions, he ripped off a leaf and began rubbing it with his finger. His father rebuked him, "What right do you have to rip a leaf from a tree and mistreat it for no purpose at all?" When Yosef Yitzchak grew up – and became the famed Rebbe Rayatz – he said that this incident had a deep impact on his life. It taught him to be sensitive to everything.

If we are sensitive to a leaf on a tree, we will – without a doubt – be sensitive to all life forms, most of all to our fellow human beings. This is the essence of *tzedakah*.

Sensitivity to life is the goal of many practices of the Torah. Some of them appear deceptively simple – for example, thanking God for the food you eat. Whenever anyone gives you something, you say thank you. And if you can thank the waiter who brought you the food, you can definitely thank the Creator who created it.

But on a deeper level, pausing for a moment to think where that food comes from makes you more sensitive to the environment, to every fiber of grass, every cell of life, because everything that God created has divine energy flowing through it. You have no right to consume a part of creation unless you show respect for it in some way.

It's true that many religious people make blessings before or after eating by rote, without sensitivity. That is mechanical Judaism. But if you understand and appreciate the concept involved, you know that little daily acts like it can sensitize your life to the needs of your family, your community, your environment, your world.

And this is, in the final analysis, is what averts the evil decree.

21. Day of Unlimited Possibilities (YK)

Yom Kippur is the only day in the year when each soul on earth comes closest to feeling its source. The innermost dimension of the soul is revealed and shines forth only on this day. This dimension of the soul – *yechidach* (“oneness”) – represents the inner unity of our souls. It transcends all fragmentation, compartmentalization, all our dualities and pluralities. It emerges only on Yom Kippur, the “Day of Oneness.”

Yom Kippur falls on the tenth day of the Hebrew month of *Tishrei*, and ten is considered a complete number – a number encompassing all of existence and the entire cycle of time and space. It is signified in the Hebrew alphabet by the letter *yud*, the first letter of the essential four-letter name of God, the Tetragrammaton, which we are forbidden to pronounce. *Yud* is written like a dot – the unifying point that fuses everything into the sacred oneness of God.

Sacredness/holiness, therefore, is the theme of this day, on which we try to be like angels. As the 16th century scholar, the Maharal of Prague, put it, “All the *mitzvot* that God commanded as on Yom Kippur are designed to remove, as much as possible, a person’s relationship to physicality until he or she is completely like an angel.”

Traditionally, on Yom Kippur, we consume no food or drink, do not engage in marital relations, do not bathe or anoint ourselves with creams or perfumes, do not wear leather shoes which symbolize luxury. In short, we try to distance ourselves from the material, pluralistic, fragmented world. And we spend most of the day in the cocoon of the synagogue immersed in prayer.

We invest all our energy in this day, because on Yom Kippur anything is possible. This we know from the very first Yom Kippur, the day which gave birth to hope – when God forgave the Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf, in effect telling humanity that there was no mistake so great, it could not be fixed.

So, if ever there was a day to begin anew, it is on Yom Kippur. This is

the day when we have the power to ask for anything we want - to achieve our deepest goals and dreams. Yom Kippur is the single most important day in our lives. Make sure that you use this most special of days to the fullest.

22. Yizkor after the Holocaust (YK)

Leibel Zisman was just 14 years old when he was liberated from Gunskirchen, the concentration camp which he reached barely alive on a death march from Mauthausen. He vividly remembers the first Yom Kippur that followed ... not the least of which because it was his birthday.

On that first Yom Kippur, he was housed in a DP Camp (in Föhrenwald) near Munich. The leading rabbi also housed there was the Klausenberger Rebbe (Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam), who had lost his wife, his 11 children and most of his followers in the war.

All the people of the DP camp - several thousand of them - came to hear the Klausenberger Rebbe speak on that Yom Kippur, and this is what he said:

“Why do we wear white on Yom Kippur? What is the significance of white? In the Jewish tradition, the groom wears a white robe (called a *kittel* in Yiddish) on his wedding day and his bride wears a white dress to show they are starting fresh, that they are pure. Also when people die, they are buried in white shrouds for the same reason. And on Yom Kippur, we want to show that we are pure, that our souls are without the stain of sin, as white as snow because we have atoned for all our wrongdoings. Also on Yom Kippur we remember the dead when we say *Yizkor*, the prayer of remembrance. We remind ourselves of the white shrouds that our deceased parents and grandparents wore when they were buried.”

And then he paused, and his voice cracked:

“Except that our parents were not buried in white shrouds ... Our parents, our grandparents, our brothers and sisters were buried in rags,

their bodies mangled in mass graves. So why do we wear white?! They did not go to their judgment in white! If this is meant to remind us of our deceased loved ones, let's look like them!"

And with that, he tore off his white *kittel*.

And everybody started to sob. The Rebbe could not control the crowd. Not too many of the people had *kittels* - after all where could you get one in a DP camp - but all were crying their eyes out. He said that they should not cry; anyone who had survived the war was holy, was pure, and did not need to put on white. But the people kept on sobbing. He had opened the floodgates, and nobody could stop the outpouring of pain that day.

The Rebbe's words rang in the ears of the bereaved. Everyone had lost close relatives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. Everyone was indelibly scarred by the loss.

We, who have come together today to observe *Yizkor*, are also indelibly scarred. For it is the nature of loss that it is immeasurable, save by the one who has suffered it.

23. The Ten Martyrs (YK)

At its most moving, Yom Kippur service describes the troubles that have befallen the Jewish people ever since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, culminating with the heart-rending story of the ten martyrs called "These I remember..."

A cruel Roman Emperor sought to punish the sages for the sin committed by the brothers of Joseph when they sold him into slavery into Egypt. Rabbi Yishmael, the High Priest, prayed to learn if this was a decree from heaven, and he was answered that it was. Thus the sages submitted to the verdict.

The liturgy graphically describes the savage executions of the ten: Rabbi Yishmael, Rabbi Shimeon ben Gamliel, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon, Rabbi Chitzpis, Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, Rabbi Chanina

ben Chchinai, Rabbi Yeshvav the Scribe, Rabbi Yehudah ben Dama, and Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava.

The angels cry out in bitter grief. “Is this the reward of the Torah?”

The angels resonating cry echoes through history – through all the death and persecution we have endured. Their cry reverberates in our Yom Kippur prayers – prayers that continue to be said with tears that soak the very fibers of existence itself. Cries that have pierce the heavens, waiting for a response.

Yes, we have submitted to Your decree. But we demand more. We appeal to You to end the pain, to end the bloodshed, to end all suffering. On the holiest day of the year, in the midst of the prayer of transcendence, we do not forget that we live in a world of pain.

Even at the height out our spiritual elevation, we remember our losses, and we implore God to amend them. This is the ultimate transcendence.

24. The Power of Neilah (YK)

In 1913, Franz Rosenzweig, an influential Jewish theologian and philosopher in Germany, was preparing to convert to Christianity as he tells in his book, *The Star of Redemption*.

A famous author and brilliant philosopher, he was then a totally secular and assimilated Jew. But on Yom Kippur night, October 11, 1913, he walked into a small Berlin Synagogue to bid good-bye to his roots. In another 24 hours, he would enter the church where his cousin, Rudolf Ehrenberg, would sponsor him for his baptism to Christianity.

He was alone and unknown to anyone in that particular synagogue on that Yom Kippur, but something happened to him. He underwent a mystical experience, though he never wrote exactly what it was. Suffice it to say that Yom Kippur so stirred him that he emerged a *baal teshuvah*, a returnee to Judaism. And he became a fully engaged Jew.

Right after *Neilah*, he sent a message to his cousin, “I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am remaining a Jew.”

What could it have been that changed Rosenzweig so profoundly that

one day. Could it have been the piety of those around him? The inspirational sermon the rabbi gave? The content of the prayers?

We don't know because he never publicly revealed it. But I venture to guess it was *Neilah*. *Neilah* means literally "locking" and it refers "the locking of the heavenly gates" as Yom Kippur comes to a close.

But just before these spiritual gates are locked, everything stands wide open, and is accessible as at no other time. At that moment we are able to reach the most intimate, vulnerable, gentle part of the soul, unshielded by any defenses. We reach it at the precise moment when *Neilah* is said, and when we finally declare God's oneness *Shema Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*.

The Shaloh, the great medieval sage writes that "there is no higher experience for the Jew – as when he acknowledges the oneness of God and his readiness to give his entire life to God." This is the moment when the spark and the flame come closest all year round. This is the most powerful moment of the year. This is the moment that you are the closest that you can come to the essence of everything, to God.

And I think Rosenzweig did. Will you?

25. GPS – God's Positioning System (YK)

The GPS – the Global Repositioning System – is a brilliant device. You key in your destination, and a polite woman's voice tells you where to go.

Of course, Jewish drivers always know better – a short cut here, a detour there. "What does the computer know? I grew up here!"

Some men are simply allergic to obeying a woman's voice. Perhaps it reminds them of their mother ... Perhaps it's an ego thing. What can she tell him that he does not know?

Especially with directions, men are impossible. Many men feel that somehow it is below their dignity to take directions. They'd rather get lost for hours, and drive by mistake to the other side of the country, than

accept directions.

I was once driving with someone, who made sure to disobey the GPS instructions, as often as he could. Every turn the woman's voice suggested a turn for him to take, he knew a better way. An hour later, we were badly lost. I said, "Maybe it's time to start listening to her?" He said, "She is an anti-Semite..."

So I told him, "Sometimes even anti-Semites get something right... Let's listen to what she has to say."

You know the story: A Jew is traveling on the subway reading a Jewish newspaper. Suddenly, to his dismay, he spots a friend of his sitting just opposite him, reading the notoriously anti-Semitic Cairo Gazette. He glares at his friend in anger: "How could you read that horrible rag?" Unabashed, the friend retorts, "So what are you reading, the Jewish paper? And what do you read there? In America, Jews are assimilating. In Israel, Jews are surrounded by enemies from all sides. Iran is developing nuclear weapons. The economy is in the toilet. The last great Jewish Wall Street firm has folded. But I read the Cairo Gazette. You know what it says? Jews are controlling the media. They run the economy. They own the banks. If you want good news, go to the anti-Semites!"

I could not convince my friend to listen to this anti-Semitic GPS, as he called it. But I noticed how it responded when he ignored its instructions. The pleasant voice, simply said, "Recalculating ..." and gave him a new plan to follow.

It struck me that that is how it is with us and God. God gave us the Torah, which is God's Positioning System - GPS, get it? And it meant to help us navigate in a turbulent world and in order to reach a desirable destination. Life has so many winding roads, so many possibilities to get lost, we can all use such a GPS. But often we know better, or we are lazy, or we are fearful, or we are confused, or we are in a bad mood. We take a wrong turn. Sometimes, for years we take wrong turns, we make mistakes and we fail.

What does God do? He always recalculates and works out a new route

based on our current position. Wherever you are and wherever you wish to be, there's a route between here and there. In Hebrew it is called *teshuvah* (returning to God). And on Yom Kippur we are assured that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* – repentance, prayer and giving to charity – reverse any evil decree. May it be so. Amen.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹. Isaiah 2:3-4, 11:6.
- ². A free translation of Psalms 118:5.
- ³. In his book *Mekadshey Hashem*.
- ⁴. Talmud, Rosh Hashana 16a.
- ⁵. As related in the introduction to *Ein Yakov* by Rabbi Yaakov Ben Chaviv.
- ⁶. Genesis 5:1.
- ⁷. Deuteronomy 6:4.
- ⁸. Leviticus 19:18.
- ⁹. Numbers 28:4.
- ¹⁰. *Nesivos Olam* vol. 2 *Nesiv Ahavas Ria* ch. 1.
- ¹¹. *Berachos* 34b.
- ¹². *Midrash Rabah Shir Hashirim*, end of section 6.
- ¹³. Exodus 32:32.