



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 17-18, 2012
Rosh Hashana Day 1

**Rosh Hashana On Mars:
Are We Accountable?**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5773 Enter the Heart"*

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Opening Blocked Pathways

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ABSTRACT

What, you may be wondering, does Rosh Hashana have to do with man's latest landing on Mars? Are there Jews on Mars?

The answer may surprise you as we explore the personal relevance of Rosh Hashana, and the opportunity and blessing it offers us in life.

The stories of the master key, the blackout in India that left 620 million people without power, the Mars' Rover Curiosity, the parking-meter in Israel, the history of Jewish unity and disunity - all build up to a powerful crescendo, which teaches us how on Rosh Hashana the entire universe, in every detail, is like the musician in a global orchestra, waiting in anticipation for you and I to serve as the conductor of this glorious symphony.

ROSH HASHANA ON MARS: ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE?

1. Is There Rosh Hashana on Mars?

One of the remarkable events of the past year took place last month when the Mars Rover Curiosity successfully landed on the far-off planet, beginning a two-year mission to examine whether the Martian environment was ever hospitable for microbial life. This is the first spacecraft to land on another planet.

You may be wondering what does landing on Mars have to do with Rosh Hashana. Do they even celebrate Rosh Hashana on Mars?

Of course, as convenient scapegoats, Jews are the brunt of some jokes blaming them for being originally Martians. Some wonder whether there are Jews on other planets. Others say all Jews are from other planets.

In the 1950's that was actually a science fiction book written by an Israeli writer, Tzvi Livneh, titled *A World's Revival* (or in Hebrew: *Tevel Be'Techitah*), referring to the "the Jews of Mars."

But all joking aside, today I will share with you the interesting connection between Mars and Rosh Hashana.

But before we get to that...

2. Accountability

As I was preparing this Rosh Hashana sermon, I was thinking about one of the most frustrating aspects of being a rabbi - motivating and inspiring your constituents and community. The challenge is actually very personal, for only when you yourself are motivated can you sincerely hope to motivate others. After all, only words from the heart ultimately enter the heart, as wrote Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe,¹ Rabbeinu Tam.²

Thus the challenge of this New Year and the High Holiday season - the *Yomim No'raim*, the Days of Awe of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur - is equal for all of us, and my words are addressed to myself as much as to you:

How will we rise to the occasion on this special day, when the contract for all of existence is renewed?

¹ Sefer HaYashar, Sha'ar 13. Cited in Shaloh, Sha'ar Ha'Oisiyos ois lamed (69a).

² 1100-1171. Rabbeinu Tam, a grandchild of Rashi's, was so called for two reasons: 1) His namesake, Yaakov our patriarch, was called "ish tam" (Genesis 25:27) - see Shaalot V'Teshuvot Rivash responsa 384. Beginning of Shaalot U'Teshvot Chaim Shaul (from the Chid"i). 2) He abolished the curse called "tam" (Leviticus 26:20) - Hagahot MaHarid on Torat Kohanim on the verse.

This also made me think of the causes that stop us from being motivated and inspired. One of the primary factors that impede our growth is excuses. We all – and in the interests of full disclosure, I admit my share of responsibility in this “epidemic” – have our reason and explanations for not living up to being the best we can be. Another term for this is: lack of accountability.

As such, I went online and searched if there was a website called excuses.com. Today you can find virtually anything on line. There is even a website called uselessinformation.com. But as we speak, no one has yet come up with that idea of a website excuses.com. [In case you’re wondering there is a site called procrastination.com].

Instead, I found a site that lists all types of excuses for virtually anything. Initially I was hesitant to share this site, but that wouldn’t be fair. So if you want the name of the site please see me after Yom Tov. Okay, what the heck: The site is called bored.com. [Now you know what your rabbi does in his free time...]

Anyway, here are a few of the top excuses I found justifying our lack of accountability. Allow me to begin with the rabbi’s excuses.

3. Excuses (Humor)

On the morning of Rosh Hashana, Rebecca went into the bedroom to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready to go to the synagogue, to which he replied in a dull voice, “I’m not going.”

“Why not?” Rebecca demanded.

“I’ll give you two good reasons Mother,” he said. “One, they don’t like me, and two, I don’t like them.”

Rebecca replied in an exasperated voice, “I’ll give you two good reasons why you must go to the synagogue. “One, you’re 54 years old, and two, you’re the rabbi.”

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After recovering from a mild heart attack, the rabbi told his wife that he didn't want to go back to his synagogue. "Why not?" she asks. The rabbi was reluctant to answer. After his wife prodded him, he sheepishly said: "Because while I was in the hospital recovering, the president of the congregation came to visit me, and brought me flowers."

"Well that was very nice of him," said his wife.

"But after you hear what he told me," continued the Rabbi, "tell me whether you would go back to synagogue."

"What did he say?"

He said: "Rabbi, the board just voted 12 to 8 to wish you a speedy recovery."

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A few more excuses for not attending services:

- Real mysterious sounding "I just had this feeling I shouldn't be there."
- The rabbi moves around too much.
- There are too many sinners in synagogue.
- I have nothing to wear.
- I atoned for my sins last year.

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But above all, and this, my friends, is not a joke: The holiday experience is not relevant to my life. I have therefore better things to do.

Sadly, I have heard this so many times, and it breaks my heart ever time. What can I, as a rabbi, do to bring alive the beauty and relevance of Rosh Hashana - its rich psychological and emotional meaning, its profound spiritual and personal message?

Let me make a small attempt.

4. Global Audit

At the beginning of each calendar year, the President of the United States gives a State of the Union address. Of course, he is speaking about the state of the country – more specifically, how the association of the various states is doing in their common union, in their common cause.

Long before the United States became a country we Jews have been delivering our own State of the Union “address” each year on Rosh Hashana. On this day, when the destiny of our lives and the “destiny of nations is determined” (as we say in today’s Musaf prayer), we always give an accounting of all that has transpired during the past year, both in our personal lives and in the world at large.

Rosh Hashana is not just another day on the year: Rosh Hashana is the collective birthday of the human race. This awesome day, when we renew our contract with God, is an introspective time for humans to look at – and into – their lives, and ask whether we are living up to our calling.

We can call it audit day – a day of personal and global audit.

Indeed, on this day, 5773 years ago the first human being performed just such an audit, as he gathered all the creatures on earth and declared: “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker.”³

Since time is cyclical, every year exactly on this day we, too, are called upon to engage and unite the entire universe in committing anew to live up to its purpose.

As Maimonides writes (about these Ten Days of *Teshuvah*):⁴ “A person must see himself and the world as equally balanced on two ends of the scale – by doing one good deed, he tips the scale and brings for himself and the entire world redemption and salvation.”

³ Tehillim 95:6. Zohar I 221b.

⁴ Rambam, Laws of Repentance, 3:4. See also Mishne Sanhedrin 37a: A person is responsible to say that the entire world was created for me; when you save a life you save the universe.

I don't know about you, but I feel excited and motivated when I hear that we are responsible to elevate the world on Rosh Hashana. It sure eliminates many of the excuses and pretenses for not being accountable. What greater gift is there than knowing that you and I have the power and the ability to change the course of destiny?!

5. Goodbye 5772/2012

As the curtain lowers on the passing year, now is the time to review and account for the events that transpired this year, with the objective of seeing what lessons we can learn from these events, and how we can intensify our efforts in improving the condition of the world to the best of our ability.

Here are some of the major events of the past year, some positive, some not so, some still pending resolution:

- The threat of Iran's nuclear capacity. Should/will will Israel attack? What will the United States do?
- Upheaval in Syria. How will it impact the Middle East? Israel?
- The continuing uncertainty around the economy
- The upcoming presidential election in the US
- The successful landing on Mars
- The discovery of a new particle with properties consistent with the Higgs boson
- The London Olympics

Is there a common denominator between these events?

6. Blackout

Perhaps we can gain insight from a lesser known event that took place this past July: In the worst power outage in world history, blackouts in India left 620 million people without power!

620 million. Now that's a number. Twice the population of the US ... 44 times the population of the entire Jewish nation!

Besides for the obvious lesson about our dependence - or is it overdependence - on technology, this blackout ... (no pun intended) illuminates for us our personal Rosh Hashana mission.

The message is simple and profound: We live in a dark fragmented world. Our job is to infuse the universe with unity and light.

When the world was first created (six days before Rosh Hashana) it was shrouded in darkness. "And darkness engulfed all of existence" (or the more traditional translation: "darkness was on the face of the deep").⁵

In the beginning, the Lord created chocolate, and he saw that it was good. Then He separated the light from the dark, and it was even better.

But then on the sixth day, with the birth of Adam and Eve, the human being elevates and unites all of creation, basking it in spiritual light.⁶

It is only due the human soul's transcendent nature that we have the curiosity - the interesting and ... curious name given to the Mars Rover - and the wonder to look into the heavens and seek out what lies beyond. Is there life other than our own? What mysteries does the cosmos contain?

What makes us human tick?

How is it that we can bring so much light into the world, but also so much darkness?

⁵Genesis 1:2.

⁶On day one, God create light, "let there be light." (ibid 3), but the true clarity and purpose (light) of existence emerges with the human being.

7. Is There Rosh Hashana On Mars?

Rosh Hashana provides us with the answer. By going back to the beginning, we can see the future. By studying the roots we can see the fruits. Rosh Hashana is described in the liturgy as *zeh hayom techilas maasecho*, as “this is the day which is the beginning of Your work.”

In the beginning, all of creation recognized the “hand inside the glove” and was aware that material existence is but a surface experience that masks the forces within. Every Rosh Hashana we are called upon to acknowledge the Divine energy which lies within and is the essence of all that exists: “May everything that has been made know that You have made it; everything that has been created understand that You have created it; and everyone who has the breath of life in his nostrils declare the prominence of God and His dominion over all.”

Every year on this day we renew our contract with God, with the universe and with destiny; we rededicate ourselves to reveal the inner unity within everything around us – *v'yaasu kulam agudah achas laasos retzoncho b'leivov sholom*, “they will all form a single unit to carry out Your will with a complete heart.”

And then we are asked to translate the declaration into action. Introduce, reveal, expose the true essence of all creation. Imbue our every act with higher purpose. Infuse our every move with spiritual direction. Instill in our every breath the awareness of our soul which is but the breath of God.

We have the choice to be part of the solution and unite the world or be part of the... problem. Will we be the cause of blackouts (India), nuclear threats (Iran), massacres (Syria), greed (economy), or excellence, light and unity.

So is there Rosh Hashana on Mars? You bet! Images of Mars being beamed back by the Rover Curiosity may not include any pictures of a *minyán* praying or a shofar sounding, or of an apple dipped in honey. But rest assured that Mars (and whatever they find there) – like the entire universe and all of existence – is waiting in anticipation whether we humans will do our part to renew the contract for all of existence...

8. The Master Key (Chassidic Story)

A beautiful story (written up by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin) captures the power each of us carries on Rosh Hashana:

One year, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov said to Rabbi Ze'ev Kitzes, one of his senior disciples: "You will blow the shofar for us this Rosh Hashana. I want you to study all the *kavanot* (Kabbalistic meditations) that pertain to the shofar, so that you should meditate upon them when you do the blowing."

Rabbi Ze'ev applied himself to the task with joy and trepidation: joy over the great privilege that had been accorded him, and trepidation over the immensity of the responsibility. He studied the Kabbalistic writings that discuss the multifaceted significance of the shofar and what its sounds achieve on the various levels of reality and in the various chambers of the soul. He also prepared a sheet of paper on which he noted the main points of each *kavanah*, so that he could refer to them when he blew the shofar.

Finally, the great moment arrived. It was the morning of Rosh Hashana, and Rabbi Ze'ev stood on the reading platform in the center of the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue amidst the Torah scrolls, surrounded by a sea of *tallit*-draped bodies. At his table in the south-east corner of the room stood his master, the Baal Shem Tov, his face aflame. An awed silence filled the room in anticipation of the climax of the day - the piercing blasts and sobs of the shofar.

Rabbi Ze'ev reached into his pocket, and his heart froze: the paper had disappeared! He distinctly remembered placing it there that morning, but now it was gone. Furiously, he searched his memory for what he had learned, but his distress over the lost notes seemed to have incapacitated his brain: his mind was a total blank. Tears of frustration filled his eyes. He had disappointed his master, who had entrusted him with this most sacred task. Now he must blow the shofar like a simple horn, without any *kavanot*. With a despairing heart, Rabbi Ze'ev blew the litany of sounds required by law and, avoiding his master's eye, resumed his place.

At the conclusion of the day's prayers, the Baal Shem Tov made his way to the corner where Rabbi Ze'ev sat sobbing under his tallit. "*Gut Yom Tov, Reb Ze'ev!*" he called. "That was a most extraordinary shofar-blowing we heard today!"

"But Rebbe . . . I . . ."

"In the king's palace," said the Baal Shem Tov, "there are many gates and doors, leading to many halls and chambers. The palace-keepers have great rings holding many keys, each of which opens a different door. But there is one key that fits all the locks, a master key that opens all the doors.

"The kavanot are keys, each unlocking another door in our souls, each accessing another chamber in the supernal worlds. But there is one key that unlocks all doors, that opens up for us the innermost chambers of the divine palace – that master key is a broken heart."

No matter who you are, you can change the world. You can unite the world.

9. Our Union or Disunion

And the way we begin to create unity in the world, is by creating unity in our home and communities.

Which offers us another take on our Rosh Hashana State of the Union address: What is the state of the union – or disunion (tragically) – of our families and communities? What is the state of unity – or disunity – in the world around us?

The fragmentation of our lives today – which can be called *galut*, spiritual displacement – is the direct result of what happened some two thousand years ago, when due to our senseless hatred (*sinat chinam*) of each other the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed⁷ and we were banished from our land.⁸

In other words, it was our state of *disunion* that led to our current predicament. And, though we have been able to return to the Land of Israel following the Holocaust, the exile is far from over ... especially considering that half of us still live outside our homeland.

And so, we should take stock. We should see how far we have come from that disunity two thousand years ago, when brother arose against brother, when status mattered more than kindness, when the spirit of Torah law was buried in skewed adherence to the letter of Jewish law – so much so that the sages said it was actually possible to follow Jewish law and be disgusting in the eyes of Torah (*naval bireshut haTorah*).⁹

⁷Talmud, Yoma 9b.

⁸Optional addition: Baseless Hatred: The Story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza:

The Talmud (Gittin 55b-57a) encapsulates all this hatred in one dramatic story:

At this time there lived a man who had a friend named Kamtza, and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. This man arranged a banquet and sent his servant to invite his friend. But the servant got the two (very similar) names mixed up and invited the enemy instead.

When the host found his enemy seated at his banquet he ordered him out. But the enemy, Bar Kamtza, asked to stay, because he did not want to be embarrassed in front of all the honored guests, many of whom were important rabbis. He said, "I will pay for my own food and drink, if you just let me stay." "No," said the host. "Leave now!" "Then let me pay for half the cost of the entire banquet," Bar Kamtza begged. "NO!" "Then I will pay for the whole thing! Please!"

At that suggestion, the host grabbed Bar Kamtza by the arm and pulled him up from his seat and threw him out of the room. The humiliated man said to himself, "Since the sages sitting there did not stop him, it would seem that what happened met with their approval. So I will inform to the Romans against them."

He thus set a series of events into motion, which led to the destruction of the Temple.

⁹Ramban's commentary to Leviticus 19:2.

10. Ever Since Then

Ever since then, throughout close to two millennia of wandering – we, the Jewish people, have been trying to undo the baseless hatred with baseless love. Wherever we settled we built communities and established institutions to help one another, to provide for the needy and the sick. We built *Gemilat Chasodim's* (Free Loan Societies), *Bikkur Cholim's* (Visiting and Providing for the Ill), *Hachnosos Orchim's* (Welcoming Guests), and all the derivative entities that capture the essence of love, unity and social justice pioneered by our forefather Abraham and mandated by the Torah so many thousand of years ago.

At certain times, we have done better than at others.

Consider, for example, that in the 18th century, Jews confined to the Roman ghetto had no less than *thirty* benevolent associations – that's in a population of less than 5,000 people! Thirty benevolent associations! So much did each one want to help the other.

Indeed, in all the ghettos of Europe, Jews clung together and helped one another. Even the smallest, poorest ghetto had a lodging house for indigent strangers, a salaried physician so medical assistance was available to all, and a free educational system.¹⁰

Despite poverty and pressures of life in the segregated zone of White Russia known as the Pale of Settlement (where all the Russian Jews were confined in the 19th century), Jewish charitable activities flourished unabated. Some provinces were so poor that more than 20 percent of the residents depended on the largesse of their neighbors, *and yet money was found ...* to supply poor students with clothes, soldiers with kosher food, the poor with free medical treatment, poor brides with dowries, and orphans with technical education.¹¹

Yet, despite all the beautiful and noble efforts, we still have our work to do in uniting our people, both here and in Israel.

¹⁰ *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* by Cecil Roth, pp. 249-274.

¹¹ *Jewish History Atlas* by Martin Gilbert, p. 73.

11. Living in Harmony (Humor)

Of course, living in harmony is really hard for Jews for we are by nature a stubborn, hard-headed and stiff-necked people. And this has been our greatest weakness as well as our greatest strength. Our stubbornness has meant that we have stood up to hundreds of years of relentless persecution, often giving up our lives rather than give up on our Judaism.¹² But it has also meant that we have continued to be as disunited as a people can be.

An example: When U.S. troops liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban, they found only two Jews still living in Kabul, and they were not speaking to each other. That's the quintessence of being "stiff-necked" – enemy all around you, but you can't even say *Shalom* to each other.¹³

Another example: In 1950s, Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, had a legendary conversation with Harry Truman, the U.S. president, who was complaining that it was a very hard thing to be president of 180 million people. Weizman retorted, "You should try being president of 1.8 million presidents."¹⁴

The Jewish penchant for argument and disunion has given rise to a stream of jokes, like: "If you were to find two Jews on a desert island, you'd find three synagogues. One for each and a third one neither will go into."

¹²Midrash Rabba on Exodus 32:9.

¹³They were the subject of two plays, *The Last Two Jews in Kabul* and *Two Jews Walk into a War*, as well as a documentary *Cabal in Kabul*. The elder, Ishaq Levin, died at age 80 in January 2005, and the survivor, Zebulon Simentov, remarked he was not sorry to see him go. See "World Briefings," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2005.

¹⁴Quoted in Blech, Benjamin, *Jewish History and Culture*, New York: Alpha/Macmillan, 1999, p. 297.

12. Senseless Kindness

But, I dare say, senseless kindness is winning out over senseless hatred.

And, on this universal birthday of the human race, on this audit day, when we stand accountable before God, I would like to focus on the progress we have made by telling you a couple of stories that I hope will inspire you to emulate these valiant Jews who are doing their part to bring us all together from a state of disunion to a state of union.

13. Sweet Example (Inspirational Story)

The following is such a sweet example of senseless kindness that it brings tears to my eyes.¹⁵

A Facebook page with over 140,000 LIKES has words of praise for youths in Jerusalem rushing to place coins in parking meters moments before a parking inspector issues a summons.

Nir Menussi writes that he sees this occur on a regular basis. Just the other day he saw a vehicle's parking meter that was about to go red, and a few feet away the parking inspector approaching. A black-hatted peyos-wearing youth passed by, saw what was happening and quickly threw a coin into the parking meter, and then rushed to place coins in other meters that have expired.

Adding to Nir's amazement was the parking inspector, a husky male with a shaven head, who then called the youth over to assist him, telling him: "Not this meter, he still has time. Put money in the other parking meter."

The two walked together and the inspector instructed the youth to place coins in the parking meters of expired meters, avoiding a summons.

Menussi writes: "I could not control myself, so I went over to the two and told them: 'You made my day. You are both simply *tzaddikim*. There should be more like you in Israel!'"

The parking meter inspector responded: "I am not a *tzaddik*, he is! I am just assisting him."

¹⁵ <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/?p=138117>

14. Open Invitation (Inspirational Story)

Here is another story:

A Jewish community in Los Angeles has a monthly event they call "Bart Stern Open Shabbat," when they invite anyone who cares to come to their homes for a Shabbat meal.

This is what the late Bart Stern, an elderly Holocaust survivor, used to do *every* Shabbat on his way home from the synagogue.

His route took him past the parking lot of a large hotel, and there he would frequently encounter fellow Jews whom he would invite for a Shabbat meal. A friend witnessed Bart in action one day:

Seeing two young women getting out of the car, Bart gave a friendly wave which they returned.

- "Hello there," he said in his thick Hungarian accent, "enjoying the day?"

- "Yes, yes we are," the young women replied.

- "Are you here for business or pleasure?" Bart pressed on.

- "Business as a matter of fact," was the answer.

- "And what line of work are you in?"

- "We are both representatives for a clothing manufacturer."

- "Ah the *shmatteh* business. You must be Jewish?"

- "As a matter of fact ..."

- "Well, in that case you must join me for Shabbat lunch. Please, my wife will be so disappointed if I don't bring some guests home. She's been cooking for two days!"

In this way, Bart introduced countless strangers to the warmth of Shabbat, and when he passed away ago, his synagogue decided to inaugurate a "Bart Stern Open Shabbat" in his honor to invite all comers ... to connect with their fellow Jews as brothers and sisters instead of as ... strangers.

15. Being Haimish

New York Times columnist, David Brooks,¹⁶ identifies an interesting trait of the Jewish people, which he calls being *haimish*.

He says he became aware of this phenomenon when on a trip to Africa where he stayed at various safari camps. Some were fancy, some were simple, but the nice ones were *haimish*. That is, “friendly, warm and familial.”

Yes, we the Jews have this tendency to be “familial” ... to be busybodies in the best sense of the word ... to be caring, involved and warm ... to treat our fellows like relatives.

And if this is a trait that identifies us, then we can congratulate ourselves. For we see how far we have come from senseless hatred.

Oh yes, we still have far to go, but if each person in this room does his part, we could wrap this up in one year. And if we do our part, think about the repercussions for the world:

In one year, peace could come. In one year, the lion could be licking the head of the lamb. And in one year there might be no more hatred, no more bitterness, no more strife.

And the unity within us and within our communities has a domino effect – like the “butterfly effect” – that ripples unity across the entire universe and all of the planets, including Mars, and galaxies. Our one act has the power to “tip the scale and bring for [us] and the entire world redemption and salvation” (as Maimonides writes).

We have 365 days to go. Let’s not waste a moment. And especially let’s not waste this day.

[Blessings to each of you and your families of *ketivah v’chatima tovah, l’shana tovah u’metukah, Amen.*]

¹⁶ The Haimish Line by David Brooks, *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 2011.

16. You are the Conductor (Optional Ending)

I cannot find a better image for the indispensable and eloquent role each of us plays on Rosh Hashana than that of a conductor leading a magnificent symphony.

Taking the cue of Adam who on the first Rosh Hashana gathered all the creatures on earth and declared “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker,” each one of us on this day plays the same role.

Like the conductor of a grand orchestra, today you control the destiny of the universe: You have the opportunity to gather together all the creatures and elements of the entire world, and coordinate them in one glorious divine song.

Imagine every aspect of your life – at work and at home – as another instrument.

Imagine every mountain, every blade of grass, every fiber of DNA, every step you take; imagine every detail of existence, from a sub-atomic particle to the super galaxies, every planet – including Mars – as a musician with his violin, oboe, flute or clarinet, a bassoon, cello or trumpet in hand. Imagine them all in place. All waiting, in anticipation.

Now you, the conductor mount the stage. Everyone and everything is looking to you. You raise your hand, and with one wave the music begins.

Blessings to each of you and your families of *ketivah v'chatima tovah, l'shana tovah u'metukah*, Amen.