

It's Okay to be Nervous, but You've Got This;

Or: Dropping the Torah on Rosh Hashanah Will Humble the Proud

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"This is the day of judgment. It is awesome and full of dread."

I remember my rabbi as a kid booming those words from the old maroon *Gates of Repentance* prayer book. They made Rosh Hashanah sound so ominous.

Then I became a rabbi, and I got it. For synagogue professionals, the High Holidays do indeed feel like days of judgment full of dread.

The whole congregation's going to be here, right? And we want to make sure we "do well."

I remember my first year as an assistant rabbi in Chicago. I was asked to give the sermon on Erev Rosh Hashanah, and I was nervous about it. I hoped my new congregants would judge me favorably.

(Little did they know—little did I know—that today, 15 years down the line, I would drop the Torah scroll on Rosh Hashanah! Oy, that's an ugly mark on a rabbinic career. 🙄)

Anyway, I remember how my senior rabbi made some quip that calmed my nerves a bit. She meant to reassure me: "You know what you're doing. You've got this."

But I took something else from what she said, too.

And that is: The High Holidays are not a performance, and the congregation is not an audience here to be entertained.

We are all here for reasons much more profound than that. Maybe we've forgotten that; or maybe we never understood it in the first place.

But today is the day of judgment: not a day for me to judge you, or you to judge me, or for us to judge each other.

Today is the day we come before God—all of us, whether we're sitting in the pews or standing on the bimah, whether we're wearing white robes or not.

On Rosh Hashanah, there is only one audience and one judge to whom we are all accountable, to whom we all must be truthful about our lives.

The goal is precisely not to put on a show, or to act like we're watching one. The goal is to be authentic and vulnerable and rip ourselves wide open and bare it all before God.

And if you're not feeling nervous about that, well then...you're missing the point of the High Holidays.

I don't mean we should be nervous that God might strike us down or anything like that. That's not the God I believe in.

As I said last year, God, to me, is a dear friend who loves and cares about me endlessly.

God is patient with me, comforts me, encourages me, inspires me, and helps me find strength when I need it.

And I am in covenant with God, which means I have responsibilities to God, and God has a stake in my life. So, I owe it to God to be the best version of myself I can be.

That's why I'm nervous today: because I know I haven't been as good a person, or husband, or father, or colleague, or rabbi as I'm capable of being. Not even close.

And since God and I have such a close personal relationship, I feel I have an obligation to be honest about my failings and try my hardest to be better.

It's a scary prospect. And I don't particularly want to do it, any more than I want to tell my wife or my parents or my children that I've done things I'm ashamed of.

I don't want to admit to them that I've done things to hurt other people, or to hurt them.

I'm not nervous that they're going to punish me, or abandon me, or even be angry at me. I'm nervous because admitting my mistakes and failures and character flaws to people I love and who love me is really hard to do.

The same is true when it comes to our relationship with God.

Judaism understands that this anxiety is part of the human condition.

Maimonides taught that, in the course of daily life, we tend to focus too much on things that don't matter, things that are material and fleeting, things we think are so important but are actually empty and vain.

We become arrogant and self-centered, and we forget about God. And as a result, whether we realize it or not, our relationship with God grows distant.¹

Speaking for myself, I feel very far from God right now. Maybe you feel that way, too.

That's why God commands us to listen to the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

What's the connection? The Hasidic master Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev explained it with a parable:

There was once a king who sent his son to a faraway place.

The young prince was there so long that, in time, he forgot what it was like to live in the king's palace. He forgot the decorum of royal life, he forgot the language of the court, and he had only the faintest memory of the king himself.

One day, the young prince heard that the king was coming to town. Though by now he had strayed far from the noble path, he desperately wanted to reconnect with his father. But he didn't know how.

What could he possibly say to this regal figure who had become so distant from his life?

The young man was terrified but, finally, he mustered the courage to go see the king.

When he got there, the prince froze. He so badly wanted to speak to his father, but he had no words to say. All he could do was let out a loud and piercing cry.

His cry was filled with such angst and yearning that the king knew it had come from the depths of his son's soul. This made the king's heart swell with love and compassion for his child, and they embraced for the first time since the boy had left home.

The sound of the shofar, said Levi Yitzchak, is like the prince's cry.² It's how we call out to God when we want to reconnect but don't quite know what to say.

Though we once had a close and intimate connection with God, it's been a while since we've talked. Or maybe we've been in touch all along, but there are things we've been too embarrassed to share.

But now, Rosh Hashanah is here and it's time to open up. The problem is, we feel like we don't know how—and that makes us anxious.

We've been sitting in this sanctuary for a while now, but the words aren't coming. Our walls are still up.

And anyway, we're having people to the house for lunch, and we have to remember to pick up ice on the way home.

It's so much easier to think about logistics than it is to take stock of our life, right?

The famous playwright David Mamet—who, by the way, is also a Reform Jew—wrote that it's not that we don't believe in God and holiness and things like the day of judgment...

It's that we do believe in them—but the thought of coming face-to-face with eternity and making account of our life is so unsettling that it fills us with existential dread.

So, subconsciously, we choose to avoid it by focusing on things like food, or what people are wearing, or anything else that doesn't demand we think seriously about who we really are and how we're living our life.³

But soon, Dr. Bender and our T'kiyah Team will come to the bimah to sound the shofar—the sound we are commanded to hear today.

If we listen to it intently, maybe it will pierce our resistance and penetrate deep into our soul.

Maybe we can try to feel it right in here, like a primal cry to God coming from the core of our being.

A cry so raw and so powerful that our emotional walls will finally come tumbling down like the walls of Jericho,⁴ and we'll stop thinking about ice and lox and setting the table, and feel compelled to think hard about the questions that really make us nervous:

- Can I learn to control my temper and stop reacting impulsively?
- Will I stop blaming other people for everything that goes wrong and take responsibility for my part in it?
- Can I stop wallowing in self-pity and just do something to improve my situation?
- Can I let go of my grudges and try to mend my broken relationships?
- Will I swallow my pride and try listening to what other people have to say for a change?
- Will I stop hiding from the people who love me and share more of myself with them?⁵

I don't really want to ask myself these things, and I'm guessing you don't either.

We'd much rather spend the High Holidays thinking about who's bringing what for break-the-fast. But if we do, we will have missed the point entirely.

Because the book on our life is open for the next 10 days.

And now is the time to come to our beloved Friend and ask for help in becoming better than we're capable of being on our own.

That's hard to do, and it's normal to feel nervous about it.

But we are also about to hear the sound of the shofar. And that should reassure us: We've got this.

True, we may feel far away and lost for words, but God's affection for us is deep. God remembers us and is searching for us, too.⁶

If we reach out to God in humility and love and longing for connection, we will be welcomed home with open arms. That's the promise of the covenant.

I don't get nervous anymore about how I'm going to do in front of all of you on the High Holidays, but I still get nervous about how I'm going to do in front of God.

I could ease my anxiety by getting caught up in the distractions. But, please, let's all try not to do that this year.

Instead, let's remember: Today is the day of judgment.

And authenticity, honesty, introspection, the will to change, not to be perfect but to be better—these are the things we will be judged on.

That's the whole point of the High Holidays.

1 See *Mishneh Torah, T'shuvah* 3:4

2 From the collection *Shamuah Tov*, sourced by Rabbi Art Green

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4 See *Joshua* 6:5

5 The foregoing questions were inspired by the litany in *Mishkan HaLev*, 128-129.

6 This phrase is borrowed from the title of Abraham Joshua Heschel's book *God in Search of Man*.