

Just One Little Thing

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Rosh Hashanah begins exactly four weeks from tonight.

One of our daily morning minyan participants said today that this month of Elul is like the preseason. It's our time to get into shape, because the *t'shuvah* we are called to do at the season opener is hard—and admitting our shortcomings before God, community, and self will be especially taxing on our spirit if we're not ready.

I once asked a rabbinic colleague how he was feeling about his High Holidays preparation. I figured he'd say something like, "my sermons are coming along OK."

But his answer was much more profound.

"How am I feeling?," he said. "Very far from God."

I feel that way, too.

Judaism has a word for it: exile.

See, exile isn't only about physical location. It's also a spiritual state of being.

It's like a car that's out of alignment: The wheel is straight, but you're drifting off the road.

You're in the thick of daily life, but you feel a million miles away—and all you want is to get back home.

King David put it beautifully in Psalm 27, the psalm for Elul: "*Achat sha'alti me'et Adonai otah avakeish. ...*"

There's one thing I ask of God
and only that do I seek:
to dwell in God's house
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon God's beauty,

to frequent God's temple."¹

Sounds easy, right? Just one little thing.

But it's not so simple.

The famous Sephardic rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad said—to paraphrase from the classic Rodney Dangerfield movie *Back to School*—David had just one question for God...in 13 parts!²

These 13 things, says Rabbi Yosef Chaim, are the remedy for spiritual exile. They are:

1. **Knowledge**—Read, learn, and study Jewish wisdom. It will give you a better understanding of the world, of other people, and of yourself.
2. **Repentance**—Acknowledge your mistakes and internalize the pain your actions have caused others.
3. **Forgiveness**—Once you understand how you've hurt someone, you can apologize sincerely. And you can forgive people who have wronged you.
4. **Redemption**—The point of doing *t'shuvah* is not to go your separate ways, but to repair a broken relationship.
5. **Healing**—Apologizing sincerely to someone else is uncomfortable, but it does so much to ease suffering and improve well-being—theirs and your own.
6. **Abundance**—Stop comparing what you have to others. Abundance and scarcity, "a lot" and "a little," are all matters of perspective. And you can choose your perspective.
7. **Re-centering**—Gather yourself and refocus on what really matters.
8. **Justice**—Make sure you're treating people fairly—at home, at work, everywhere. Give *tzedakah* and stand up for what's right.
9. **Rejecting Wickedness**—We are all tempted by dark thoughts and impulses. That's normal. Ask God to help you find the strength not to indulge them.
10. **Supporting Righteousness**—We all know people who go out of their way to show kindness and help others. Lend them a hand.
11. **Building Jerusalem**—It's not only a place. Jerusalem is a vision of a society based on the *mitzvah* to love your neighbor as yourself. So, start there—and see how it makes your corner of the world a little better.
12. **Laying the Ground for the Future**—It starts with planting small seeds of goodness, compassion, and love in your children and grandchildren, in your

community, and wherever else you can. Seeds that will blossom over time. Each new flower brings us one step closer to wholeness and peace.

13. **Listening**—Paying close attention to what others are saying is one of the best ways to show them respect. Everyone just wants to feel heard. You can do that for someone every single day.

Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad didn't make these 13 things up.

In case you don't recognize them, they are the 13 things we Jews ask of God three times a day in our weekday Amidah prayer. (Those of you who come to the daily morning minyan already knew that!)

Spiritual exile—feeling far from God—is something we all experience from time to time.

The Amidah is a script, a daily to-do list, for getting back on track.

Knowledge. Repentance. Forgiveness. Redemption.

Healing. Abundance. Re-centering. Justice.

Rejecting Wickedness. Supporting Righteousness.

Building Jerusalem.

Laying the Ground for the Future.

Listening.

Easy, right?

Achat shaalti—Just one little thing.

In 13 parts.

1 Psalm 27:4.

2 Ben Yehoyada on b. Berakhot 30b, paragraph 3.