

# Oz Torah

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A selection of Rabbi Raymond Apple's Rosh HaShanah insights from  
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## Coming, ready or not...

This is Rosh HaShanah speaking. Remember me?

I stayed with you last year. I enjoyed my visit, but I think I may have caused you some embarrassment. You did not seem to be quite ready. I did not really understand why since I let you know in advance when I was coming. This is why I am sending this message today, to remind you that I will be there next week.

I would not want you not to have time to prepare for my arrival. No, you do not need to worry about the spare room or extra food. I am not that kind of guest.

What I am is a presence – and an opportunity.

My presence brings awe, spirituality, inspiration; please prepare for me by sitting quietly by yourself, or walking somewhere quiet, and thinking about life, yourself, the past, the future.

I am also an opportunity – to identify your destination and plan your direction.

Please – don't wait till I'm there. Be ready for me, and have a *Shanah Tovah!*



## A year of High Holydays

We call them High Holydays. The name is possibly an adaptation of the well known phrase, "high days and holy days".

Though every *yom-tov* is a holy day, Rosh HaShanah and

Yom Kippur are spiritual peaks. They draw us upward despite ourselves. Earth-bound, physical and materialistic we may be during the rest of the year, but with the advent of the *yamim nora'im* – the "awesome days" – we all find some spirituality within us.

We discover the God with whom we hardly connect for most of the year, the prayers we usually dismiss as quaint and irrelevant, and the Judaism we rarely take too seriously. We discover ourselves by encountering dimensions of our existence that we generally don't even notice. It's awesome!



The English name, "High Holydays," does not talk about awe but about holiness. "Holy" is from the Middle English "hool", meaning whole, perfect or excellent. On the other hand, the Hebrew *kadosh*, with all its variations – *kodesh*, *kiddush*, *kiddushin*, *k'dushah*, *k'doshim*, *hekdeshe*, etc. – conveys the sense of separateness.

To be holy is to be set apart. When the Torah commanded us to be holy (Lev. 19), one commentator said it meant to keep apart from sin; another said, *kaddesh atzm'cha b'muttar lach*, sanctify yourself (i.e. maintain apartness) even in what is permitted to you.

In that sense it's a holy day any time we are careful about where we go, what we do and how we do it, what we say and how we speak.

Holiness is not making yourself into a hermit and withdrawing from the world, but living in the world and doing everyday things with refinement, care and conscience.

Not only the *yamim nora'im* but every day can be a High Holy Day.

## The pain & the gain

*Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, is an anthology on the art of wise living. One of its notable sayings is a proverb of three Aramaic words – *l'fum tza'ara agra*, “According to the effort is the reward” or “According to the pain is the gain” (5:26). The author was Ben Heh-Heh, a convert and disciple of Hillel. His difficult decision to leave Roman society in order to become a Jew reflected his belief that anything important requires effort but is proved worthwhile in the end.

His advice is especially pertinent in the lead-up to Rosh HaShanah, when God assesses His creation and we assess our own achievements and failures. So often in the past year – and in every year – we have tried the easy way. We have looked for a maximum of reward for a minimum of effort. Finally of course we have sadly recognised that nothing really worthwhile was ever attained without perseverance and hard work.

Longfellow said,  
*The heights by great men reached and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.*

NO  
PAIN  
NO  
GAIN

The artist Whistler, when asked why he charged such high fees, said that he charged not for the few hours' work of painting but for the lifetime of experience which trained him to become a skilled artist.

The Kotzker Rebbe made a similar point about the art of prayer. “Why do the prayers one utters seem so ineffective?” he was asked. His answer was that just as a workman can take all day to prepare for the job he does (for example, a woodcutter spends hours sharpening his saw and only a short time actually cutting the wood), so prayer, too, is a craft for which one has to prepare painstakingly and carefully.

## Twice the same but different

Samson Raphael Hirsch analyses the word *shanah* (of *Rosh HaShanah*) and finds two derivations which contradict each other – to *repeat* and to *change*. Linguistically helpful, maybe, but psychologically difficult. Repetition is the opposite of change; change is the opposite of repetition. How does it help us to understand Rosh HaShanah when we have to take both options into account?

Let's start with repetition. It goes on all the time. It's comforting to encounter the familiar, to say “what was, is – what is, was”. You come home again and find everything in its normal place. You return to a city after years away and the old streets are still there. Many of the people are the same (though some have aged in the meantime). Even the problems are as they were.

I remember 1952, when a certain rabbi said at his induction ceremony, “Human life has become so cynically cheap that its mass destruction is not greatly deplored”. In those days most people did not have a TV set but they knew he was right because the events of the Holocaust were so recent. Time has passed, over 50 years of it. By now the TV, Internet and other media bring events into our homes as they happen and it's a repetition of what the rabbi said – cities being bombed, lives becoming a cinder, true peace still a distant dream. Other problems are also repeating – poverty, hunger, disease, homelessness, unemployment, lack of

opportunity. Because everything repeats itself so often, the greatest tragedies are weakened and neutralised.

Yet the *siddur* says something different – not “today is as yesterday” but “God renews every day the work of Creation”. That's also repetition, but on a different plane. The world was beautiful yesterday, and it's beautiful again today. The sun rose yesterday morning, and it rose again today. Nature was a source of joy and wonder yesterday, and so it is today.

That's two kinds of repetition, and they are rivals. Can we choose one and not the other? Actually we can if we use the freedom of choice which goes with being an independent human spirit.

שׁוֹנֵה

One choice is to squash the Creation motif, to decide to see only the repetitive ugliness and cruelty around us, to become negative about everything, and to lose hope in humanity – and God.

The other choice is to rise above the negative forces and accentuate the positive, turning the world from jungle to joy, replacing fanatic hatred with determined love, and trying to attune civilisation with the Divinely-given blessings of truth, justice and peace on which, the rabbis say in *Pir'kei Avot*, the world stands.

Whichever option we choose, we will find ourselves using Hirsch's second option, change. We will have changed our world, maybe for evil, maybe for good.

## What they asked me in hospital

A High Holyday prayer... Martin Buber's dialogue philosophy... Heschel's view of doctors... my row with the college cook – they all came together in my mind some years ago during a brief stay in hospital.

In the hospital, part of the routine was, every day, "What is your name? What is your date of birth? Where are you? What day is it?"

Being me, I began to be facetious. I would answer the nurses: "Are these philosophical questions?" Or, "Where am I? The same place as yesterday! What day is it? The day before tomorrow!" It was all very good-humoured; I knew why the questions were necessary, and I did eventually cooperate and give accurate factual answers.

And inevitably I thought of the High Holydays and the dramatic prayer, *Un'tanneh Tokef*: "All who enter the world come before You like *b'nei maron*". The phrase means "like soldiers in single file", or "like sheep scrutinised by the shepherd".

The message is clear. All of us have to face investigation by the Almighty. "Who are you?" is one of His questions, and "Where are you?" is another. These are philosophical questions, and dry facts are not a sufficient answer.

Martin Buber's dialogue philosophy insists that "Who are you?" is not as simple a question as it seems. The real question is not an interest in my name, but a search for relationship.

Relationships can be "I-thou" if we enter into each other's being and engage each other's personality, or "I-it", if the encounter is merely on a technical level which does not necessarily engage anything deep and meaningful.

An example comes in an essay by Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Patient as a Person". Heschel asks, What do the doctor and patient see in each other? Is the patient a unique individual with a heart and soul, or "an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing"?

Is the doctor "a prophet, a watchman, a messenger" – or "a plumber, whose task is to repair a tube in my system"?

It is not only in hospital that you might think you are no longer you, and risk being regimented and dehumanised (not, I add, that this was my own experience).

You board an aircraft and your individuality hardly exists any more: "Hand luggage in the overhead racks or under the seat in front! Mobile phones off! Seat belts fastened! No leaving your place until the captain has switched off the 'Fasten Seat Belt' sign!"

Another example. Enter your bank (if they haven't already closed down your branch) and the odds are that these days nobody knows you or even cares.

Look for help in a department store, and customer service is probably no longer in their dictionary. Phone a government office, a business firm or whatever, and get the surprise of your life if you actually get answered by a human voice.



When I was a resident student in a London college, there was often pressure in the kitchen. I chose the wrong moment to have a row with the cook. "I don't give tuppence for your B.A.!", she shouted at me, and got back to the culinary crisis. (Fortunately we later became the best of friends).

True, there are moments when your B.A. and indeed your whole soul history are irrelevant. When you stand up in a rowing boat and proclaim, "Give me some *derech erez*: after all, I have a B.A.!" you will be told to sit down and behave yourself.

But B.A. or not, the patient, the passenger, the customer, the client, the other person, whoever they are, must, most of the time, not be allowed to be dehumanised and become an "it", a mere piece of plumbing, an anonymous data entry, a soulless statistic. Maybe this is why our Jewish tradition is so averse to counting people, to reducing others to mere cogs in the wheel.

Note how careful Heschel was to call one of his books, not "What is Man?" but "Who is Man?" Each human being is a unique, precious personality.

This Rosh HaShanah, look at yourself and see if you can give the philosophical question, "Who are you? Where are you?" the answer that no-one else can give, only you.

## When I don't think of God I come to *shule*

Prayer is crucial to the religious life. "Prayer," says Milton Steinberg, "is the bridge between man and God. With the intellect one figures out that God is and also something of what He must be. In intuition one experiences Him. In revelation one receives testimony concerning Him. In the good life one charts a course by His light. In ritual one celebrates Him. But only in prayer does one establish a soul to soul interchange with Him."

In the past it used to be easier. In those days Jews were a people of prayer, on close terms with God. But now it is all much harder. There is a high degree of prayer failure.

To some extent it is due to the shattering experience of the Holocaust; many a Jew still says, "God, I do not want to speak to You!" (Though if the Holocaust has made prayer harder, the State of Israel has made it easier, for it is evidence that the Almighty does keep His word.)

Some of the problems of reaching God are, however, due not to theology but to breakdowns in the mechanics of prayer... the archaic terminology, for instance, though it must be said that old-fashioned language has a unique dignity and mystique.

Then, a person is not always in the mood. One cannot instantly switch channels from the raucous rat-race to the quiet contemplative mood of genuine prayer, but it certainly helps to follow the ancient pietists who sat and meditated for an hour before they prayed.

Houses of worship are not always good for prayer. Martin Buber tells of two friends who meet and one asks the other, "Why do I not see you in synagogue any more?"

The friend answers, "Every Shabbat morning I wake early with the intention of going to the synagogue. I get up and dress and I leave in good time. But when I get outside and see the beauty of the world God has given us, the sky and the trees and the singing birds, I begin to think of how good the Almighty is. And by the time I wake up from this meditation, it is already too late to go to the synagogue. But sometimes, when I don't think of God, I do come to *shule*!"



Perhaps we put too much faith in prayer. We are depressed, dejected, despondent, and we expect God to provide the instant cure. But Judaism says, *En som'chin al ha-nes* – "do not rely on miracles". God will help you find the solution yourself, often by enabling you to see things in better perspective and to face life with faith in your own ability to win through.

Because prayer is, above all, a poetic experience, it needs training in poetic appreciation. It requires, in Heschel's words, a sense of amazed, wondering awe.

It needs the ability to celebrate the privilege of being alive. It focuses on our limitation, and on our potential. It refines and uplifts our inner selves. It unites us with our source and destiny.

Prayer is so important that if it did not exist, we would have to invent it.



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Rabbi Apple's *OzTorah* is a weekly email service and website

exploring the timeless teachings of Jewish tradition from a contemporary Australian and global perspective. The site includes insights into the *parashah*, an Ask the Rabbi forum, and articles on various Jewish and interfaith issues.

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