



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur 5772

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Why does Rosh Hashanah precede Yom Kippur? No sooner do we mark the New Year than we begin repenting for our sins. Surely the logical sequence would be the reverse: we should repent and then usher in the New Year with a clean slate.

Rosh Hashanah is a day we celebrate the world. We appreciate the beauty, the wonder and the miraculousness of life. That appreciation is critical; for only when we understand how splendid yet fragile is God's world can we begin to repent for having damaged or neglected it. All *tikkun*, all reparation, begins in appreciation. We heal relationships because we understand their value. We seek to restore the imbalances in the natural world because its native pageantry dazzles our eyes. Yom Kippur is the outcome of our Rosh Hashanah vision: surrounded by possibility, we need to heal what we have hurt, or nurture the untended patches of God's garden. Seeing the cracks in creation, we acknowledge our obligation to fill them. First comes gratitude, then regret, then restoration.

Most of the blessings that we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah are unearned blessings. I did nothing to deserve being born to loving parents in the richest country in the world in the second half of the twentieth century—I was lucky. So it is with most of what we have. If you work hard, be grateful you were given a functioning brain and a society that rewards such work. We all stand on the ground fashioned by God and tilled by those who went before us. Most of those reading these words are among the luckiest people who ever lived. The people who are convinced that you make your own luck in this world tend to be lucky people; what we have is due less to merit than to *mazel*.

The recognition of felicity is what motivates us to help those in developing countries who have not yet been given these gifts. Why do we relieve hunger? Because we are grateful to be well fed. Why do we work to alleviate poverty? Because wealth is not our birthright but our blessing. In other words, having absorbed the lessons of Rosh Hashanah—that there is so much to be thankful for—we move to Yom Kippur, where we try to make things right.

The proper attitude toward good fortune is not guilt, it is responsibility. There is no reason to feel bad that one is lucky. Instead, our advantages should be an engine for generating goodness in the lives of others. Too often, our appreciation is dormant: We beat our chests on Yom Kippur to jump start our hearts. This spiritual shock reminds us that we have a responsibility to those who are less fortunate.

The powerful *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, asking who will live and who will die in the coming year, enunciates a deep truth—that none of us is entirely in control of our lives. Time and chance, as Ecclesiastes teaches, happen to us all. Our response to this, *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*—repentance, prayer and doing justly, does not determine when we will die, but how we will live. If we understand the lesson of the New Year, that we live in a bursting, beneficent world, then we will move naturally to the lesson of Yom Kippur: Live so that others will share in the beauty you see and the bounty you have been given. May the coming year move us to work for others to have what we wish for ourselves.



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