

When the writer Harry Golden was young, he once asked his father, “Dad, if you don’t believe in God, why do you go to shul each week?” His father answered, “Son, Jews go to synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle goes to talk to God. I go to talk to Garfinkle.”¹

So, let’s ask ourselves, “Why am I here tonight?” Whatever the reason, I invite you to pause, take in this sanctuary, be aware of the people, recall the experience we just shared, and know that you have just begun Rosh Hashanah. Now, like your strength trainer, I want you to be more intentional with your High Holy Day experience.

How easy is it for me to say that, but so complicated to do. When I work out and the trainer says, “Be more intentional,” I know what that means: focus on the movement, focus on the muscles. But intentionality in services? That’s complicated. To begin, there are many different reasons why we’re here. Moreover, there can be many obstacles to a meaningful experience: God, Hebrew, being out of practice, a history of finding services boring, etc. On the one hand, these obstacles are real. On the other hand, these obstacles can also be a way of saying: I’m not worthy of experiencing meaning, I’m not worthy of getting something more out of the holidays. So, the first thing to recognize is that to be intentional requires a measure of spiritual courage, the courage to feel worthy and then to go beyond what comes naturally.

Some may have the courage and know how to be more intentional. For others, I offer four practical examples to overcoming obstacles and opening doors to greater meaning in these services.

1. Maybe we’re here to be moved spiritually. My invitation is this: choose a moment to focus. Ask the person next to you not to bother you. Close your eyes. Direct your awareness to the choir, the music, the melody, the chanting, or the words. Choose something – something you hear or something you see - and make *that* the object of your attention. Immerse yourself in the experience.
2. Maybe we’re here for self-reflection, introspection. Traditionally Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaDin* - the Day of Judgment. Whether we are believers or atheists, have the courage to accept that the purpose of this holiday is an intense examination and evaluation of our lives. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, writes, “[Today i]t is as if the world has become a courtroom. God Himself is the Judge. The shofar announces that the court is in session, and we are on trial, giving an account of our lives. ... These are days of reflection and introspection when we stand in

¹ Adapted from Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. [New York: Avon Books, 1981], 122.

the conscious presence of Infinity, knowing how short and vulnerable life really is, and how little time we have here on earth.”² During these Days of Awe, we contemplate where we have succeeded and where we have missed the mark. What we have mended and what needs mending. What we have fixed and what remains broken.

3. Maybe we're here to pray. The Talmud in Sanhedrin critiques lip service, saying “The Holy Blessed One seeks the heart.” And the rabbis called prayer, *avodat halev*, the work of the heart. Let us put our hearts into the words of the prayerbook *or* let us leave the book behind and make the feelings that arise the prayer of our soul. If God is an obstacle to prayer, try this perspective: open your heart to the listening presence of the universe.
4. Maybe we're here for community. First, give yourself time to schmooze in the lobby. Then, in the sanctuary, start by letting go of the expectations of being moved spiritually. Get rid of any self-judgment. Quiet the voice that says what you're supposed to do or feel. Own your sense of belonging. Focus on the people in the room, their voices, and allow your voice to join theirs. Feel your connection to this communal experience. Connect with others throughout the world celebrating these High Holy Days and connect with generations past who have done the same.

This Rosh Hashanah, have the courage to believe you are worthy of finding greater meaning in this practice. Have the spiritual courage to be intentional, to go beyond what comes naturally.

Tradition says that we set the tone for the entire year on Rosh Hashanah. So, this message is more than how to get something more out of the High Holy Days. It's about seizing this moment, Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, the start of the rest of our life, to live with courage and intention. The Jordanian businessman and university president Nido Qubein said, “Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start.” Tonight is the start. Use these holy days to build your courage muscle. Be intentional. And let us see where we can go.

L'shana tova tikateivu v'tehateimu – May you be written and sealed for a good year.

² The Koren Rosh Hashana Mahzor. Israel: Koren Publishers, 2011, xv-xvi.