

Meaning of the *High Holidays* for Humanistic Jews

The holidays of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) have evolved from the texture of our culture and history into the most important Jewish communal celebrations of the year. A thousand years ago, a prayer was written to express the central meaning of these important days:

U'ntaneh Tokef

(Let us speak of the awesomeness...)

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall leave the world and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire, who by the sword, who by the beast. Who by hunger, who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague...?”

From traditional High Holiday liturgy

This clearly articulates the anxiety of our ancestors who felt helpless and out of control of their lives. To alleviate some of the fear, they sought to influence or avert the severity of divine judgment by **applying three fundamental concepts**. These concepts still provide meaning for us today, even for secular and Humanistic Jews who view ultimate judgement as coming only from our own high expectations for ourselves, and the values of our friends, family, and society.

Teshuvah

תְּשׁוּבָה

Traditionally *teshuvah* is used to connote repentance, however it means “turning.” For Humanistic Jews, regretting our shortcomings and finding the resolve to change more closely conveys the essence of *teshuvah*. We make the conscious decision to change what needs changing and improve what needs improving. As Humanistic Jews we recognize the festival of Rosh Hashanah as a time of renewal, reflection and new beginnings. As the first day of the Jewish year, Rosh Hashanah marks a turning point, a separation between what was and what will be. Now is the time for turning, but turning does not come easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. It means recognizing that we can change.

Adapted from Rabbi Eva Goldfinger

Tefillah

תְּפִילָּה

The concept of *tefillah* is commonly translated as prayer. It is derived from the word for self-judgment. *Tefillah* implies honest introspection and soul-searching, the process of self-examination or *cheshbon hanefesh*. We ask ourselves, “Have we acted in a way that satisfies our conscience? Have we met standards of ethical and moral behavior that are consistent with human decency? Where have we fallen short of expected and reachable goals? Where could we have extended ourselves just that one step further?”

Adapted from Rabbi Eva Goldfinger



Tzedakah

צְדָקָה

After *t'shuvah*, finding the resolve to change, and *tefillah*, honest self-judgement, there is one thing left to do; put our resolve into action. Commonly translated as "charity," the word *tzedakah* is derived from *tzedek*, meaning actions that go far beyond charity. *Tzedakah* is the act of improvement, of doing what is just, right, virtuous and charitable.

Adapted from Rabbi Eva Goldfinger

Thus, with these tools for betterment at our disposal, we offer the following reinterpretation of the U'ntaneh Tokef for Humanistic Jews:

The Inspiration of This Day

...Let us declare the awesome inspiration provided by this day.

When we begin the New Year, it is debated,

And when we commit ourselves, it is determined:

Who shall be truly alive and who merely exist;

Who shall be fulfilled and who shall not;

Who shall be pierced by the sword of envy and who torn by the beast of resentment;

Who shall hunger for love and who thirst for companionship;

Who shall be shattered by quakes of social change and who plagued by oppression;

Who shall find contentment and who shall wander in discontent;

Who shall be poor in spirit, who rich in tranquility;

Who shall be brought low with futility, and who shall be exalted through fulfillment?

Author Unknown,

Based on Reinterpretation by Rabbi Stanley Rabinovitz

We wish you a happy and healthy New Year!

Society for
Humanistic
Judaism

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