ROSH HASHANA GEMS

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THE EVENING SERVICE

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לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכָּתֵב וְתֵחָתֵם

shall your new year be Good, or happy?

(p.44)

SHELL YOUR NEW YEAR BE GOOD, OR HAPPY? (P.44)

Have you ever noticed that the traditional greeting on Rosh Hashanah is: “L’shanah tovah tikatev.” “May you be inscribed for a good year,” but on January 1st, we wish each other a “Happy New Year.” Why is it that tonight we wish each other a “Shanah Tovah”, a good year, rather than Shanah Sameach, a happy one? Don't we want to be happy?

On Rosh Hashanah, we remind ourselves that our real goal is not to strive for happiness, but to strive for goodness. If we do that, happiness will follow. Happiness is a by-product of a meaningful life. People who make doing good and attaining good character more important than achieving happiness will achieve happiness but pursuing happiness for its own sake, devoid of meaningfulness, usually results in unhappiness.

That’s why people wake up the morning after New Year’s with a big hangover. They were pursuing a “happy new year,” but found only short-term enjoyment followed by long-term pain.

So, L’shanah tovah, may we all be inscribed for a good year. May we have the peace of mind and sense of self-worth derived from the pursuit of goodness and holiness, and then indeed, we’ll have a sweet and happy New Year as well!

לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכָּתֵב וְתֵחָתֵם!
ONE OF MY FAVORITE FOODS DURING ROSH HASHANAH IS HONEY. DIP AN APPLE IN IT. SPREAD SOME ON BREAD. BAKE IT IN CAKE. IT’S ALL GOOD. NOT ONLY IS HONEY TASTY, BUT IT’S A POWERFUL SYMBOL FOR ROSH HASHANAH, REPRESENTING OUR DESIRE FOR A SWEET NEW YEAR. THIS LOVELY TRADITION IS AN ANCIENT AND UNIVERSAL JEWISH CUSTOM.

HONEY CERTAINLY ADDS SWEETNESS TO RECIPES. BUT ACCORDING TO CUSTOM, IT ALSO REPRESENTS SOMETHING DEEPER THAT WE ARE MEANT TO REALIZE AT ROSH HASHANAH: TRANSFORMATION. HONEY, WHICH IS PRODUCED BY BEES, IS FRAGRANT AND SWEET. AT THE SAME TIME, BEES WHEN THEY STING CAUSE PAIN. THIS PARADOX REPRESENTS AN INNER THEME OF THE JEWISH NEW YEAR.

TO UNDERSTAND THIS IDEA, CONSIDER WHAT WE REFER TO AS THE SWEETNESS IN OUR LIVES. THE TIMES OF THE YEAR WHEN WE’RE SUCCESSFUL, THINGS GO EASY AND WE’RE PROSPEROUS. WE THINK OF THOSE TIMES AS SWEET. THEN THERE ARE OTHER TIMES WHEN WE FEEL THE STING ASSOCIATED WITH CHALLENGE AND HARDSHIP. AN AVERAGE YEAR IS MADE UP OF LOTS OF SWEETNESS AND MANY STINGS.

EATING HONEY ON ROSH HASHANAH SYMBOLIZES OUR G-D-GIVEN CAPACITY TO TRANSFORM NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES INTO POSITIVE ONES, AND ULTIMATELY TURN THEM INTO BLESSINGS. JUDAISM CALLS ON US TO ACKNOWLEDGE FAILURE AND MISFORTUNE WITHOUT DIMINISHING IT — IT HAPPENED AND IT WAS BAD, BUT WE HAVE THE ABILITY TO TRANSFORM NEGATIVE ENERGY INTO A FORCE FOR HEALING AND BLESSING. FOR EXAMPLE, YOU’VE WORKED HARD AT SOMETHING THAT YOU ACCOMPLISHED. YOU HOPE THAT PEOPLE IN YOUR FRATERNITY OR SORORITY WILL PRAISE YOUR WORK, BUT NO ONE DOES. YOU FEEL HURT. TAKE THAT PAIN AND LEARN THAT WHEN YOU SEE SOMEONE ELSE PUTTING IN EFFORT YOU WILL GO OUT OF YOUR WAY TO PRAISE THEIR WORK.

THE CREATOR OF THE WORLD’S FINEST VIOLIN, ANTONIO STRADIVARIUS, CRAFTED HIS MOST BEAUTIFUL VIOLINS FROM PILES OF BROKEN, WATERLOGGED OARS HE FOUND ON THE DOCKS OF VENICE. HE UNDERSTOOD THAT IN THOSE SHATTERED RUINS LAY THE POTENTIAL FOR GREAT MUSIC.

THIS IS TRUE OF MORE THAN VIOLINS. IT IS TRUE OF ALL THAT IS BROKEN IN LIFE. INDEED, THE WORD YISRAEL (ISRAEL) ALSO MEANS SHIR-EL, G-D’S MELODY. TO BE A JEW IS TO TAKE THE FRAC TURED SHARDS OF HISTORY AND TURN THEM INTO MUSIC, SO THAT EVERY DAY, EVERY ACT, EVERY MITZVAH CONTRIBU TES ANOTHER SWEET NOTE IN THE DIVINE SYMPHONY.

SO AS WE DIP THE APPLE IN HONEY THIS RO SH HASHANAH, LET US BLESS EACH OTHER AND ALL PEOPLE THAT IN THE YEAR TO COME THERE WILL BE ONLY SWEETNESS, AND IF THERE ARE ANY “STINGS” MAY WE TURN THEM INTO BLESSINGS.
“And in His Goodness continually renews the work of creation, each day.” This passage reminds us that the Creator is constantly and intimately involved with His creation.

One of the powers of prayer is that it trains us to see the world with new eyes and sense the daily miracle of existence, to see Divine providence in random events that unfold around us.

In 1945, engineer Percy Spencer should have been hard at work on military radar. Instead, he was distracted and a bit annoyed after noticing a sudden stain on his pants. A chocolate bar in his pocket had mysteriously melted.

After a moment’s thought, Spencer saw the connection between two very different objects: the device he was standing in front of — a magnetron that generated high-frequency radio waves — and that melted chocolate in his pocket.

Intrigued, Spencer placed popcorn kernels near the magnetron. Before long, popcorn was popping all over the lab floor. Spencer then put a raw egg in a pot in front of the magnetron. The exploding egg splattered a nearby coworker. Spencer had stumbled onto the technology behind the microwave oven.

Life is chaotic. Messes happen, and stains ruin clothes. But be mindful. Don’t allow yourself to be discouraged by life’s little problems. In G-d’s world, there is no such thing as random chance. We don’t know, as Spencer did not, what opportunity may suddenly present itself. Will this be a rewarding mess?

Everything depends upon whether we leave our minds open to the world unfolding as G-d intends.

G-d’s blessings flow continuously, but unless we open our eyes to them, they will melt away.

Professor ‘Bucky’ Fuller was a renowned American inventor and engineer. His students once asked him to name the most important figure of the twentieth century.

Without a moment’s hesitation he said, “Sigmund Freud.”

They were shocked. Freud? Why not Einstein, about whom Fuller had written extensively, or another figure from the world of science, or technology to which he had devoted his considerable energy?
Fuller explained himself. “Freud,” he said, “introduced the single greatest idea upon which all the significant developments of the twentieth century rested: the invisible is more important than the visible. You would never have had Einstein,” Fuller argued, “if Freud hadn’t convinced the world of this truth first. You would never have had nuclear physics.”

Freud’s idea was a profoundly Jewish one, in fact it is theme of the Shema prayer. Judaism taught the world, that the invisible is more important than the visible.

You see, since the beginning of time, humans saw the natural world as a play of competing forces, which they personified as gods. The sea struggled against the earth, the wind and rain and fire struggled against each other for control over the planet.

There was no ultimate meaning to history. The world was a product of random chance. Humanity and the universe came into being for no reason; we exist for no reason, we will perish for no reason, it will be as if we had never existed.

But Judaism taught humanity that beneath this appearance of conflict and multiplicity there is “Hashem Echad,” a oneness, a singularity, an all-powerful and infinitely-compassionate, infinitely-just G-d.

During the Shema, we cover our eyes and move inward to the world we cannot see. We concentrate on this deeper reality, that the universe exists, and we exist for a reason. Because One G-d brought us into existence with purpose and love, and therefore our lives have ultimate meaning.

In the village of Premishlan, the mikvah, the ritual bath, was on top of a steep hill. During the winter, the snow made the incline very slippery and the townspeople took a longer route around the mountain rather than try to scale it.

The Chassidic master, Meir of Premishlan, however, would walk go straight up. The people considered this quite wondrous.

One day a few young cynics decided to put an end to this superstition. They knew that they had greater athletic prowess than the frail Rabbi. If he could climb the mountain, they surely could.

And so they followed Rabbi Meir as he effortlessly ascended the hill. But after climbing only half way up, all of them fell and were badly bruised.

One of the youths somewhat shamefacedly asked Rabbi Meir, “What is your secret? How do you ascend the mountain so easily?”

Meir smiled and replied:

“When you are connected above, you don’t fall below.”

There are times in all our lives when we are on a slippery slope. How can we prevent ourselves from falling?

By being connected above, by ingraining in our heart that the invisible is more important and more real than the visible, by knowing that underneath the surface of reality is G-d’s Oneness that sustains us all. That gives us a rope to hold on to as we navigate life’s slippery landscapes.
The theme of this poem is that human beings, in spite of their status as mere earthly creatures, can unite with the angels in singing G-d’s praises. The first line in each stanza describes how the angels praise G-d. The second describes human beings’ praise. The third line carries the refrain אֵלּוּ וְאֵלּוּ — the celestial together with the terrestrial acknowledge and affirm in joyous song that “The Lord is King…”

The notion that human beings can rise to the level of angels, or even higher, is a recurring theme in Jewish thought. Each one of us possesses unfathomable power within, no matter how inconsequential we may seem.

In 1972, NASA launched the Pioneer 10 space probe. Its journey was a breakthrough, accomplishing several firsts in the history of space travel. It was the first man-made object to fly beyond Mars, the first to fly through the asteroid belt, first to fly by Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. And it was the first to leave the solar system.

Twenty-five years after its launch, Pioneer 10 was more than six billion miles away from Earth. Despite that immense distance, it continued to beam back radio signals and photos.

That’s an astonishing feat of technology. But even more astonishing is that Pioneer 10 beamed all those signals back to earth with an only an eight watt transmitter — about the power of a small bedroom nightlight! All that information, beamed across billions of miles, by an eight watt transmitter.

The human soul is no less magnificent in its abilities. Let no one — yourself included — look only at superficial features, and declare a limit to what you can do. There is more potential in the soul than in anything else in the universe. It sets human beings apart from animals, bestowing us with our endless capacity to imagine something greater than what is, and to bring it into being. What is apparent on the surface of a person is a fraction of what lies within. As this prayer reminds us, we possess the power to sing with angels. We can reach heaven and redefine earth.

Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to consider what we might yet be. It is a precious gift that provides us with the opportunity to recalibrate our existence so that we can change ourselves and contribute in new ways to the lives of our families, communities and the world. Like the Pioneer probe voyaging through space, we have inside of us a power that, when harnessed, can send us soaring into the heavenly realms and beyond.
Just like our faulty automobiles, sometimes our lives are missing the brakes — the discipline, the control, the self-restraint that we need in order to live a more meaningful and fulfilled life.

Fortunately, on Rosh Hashanah we hear another kind of horn—the shofar— that tells us that if we don’t get the brakes fixed, we may wind up barreling down the road, out of control. The shofar is an alarm that reminds us to take ourselves in for an annual check-up, to overhaul our values, to clean up our relationships and straighten out our life’s direction.

The idea of life as a struggle between the lure of bad habits and our desire to better ourselves is reflected in the letters of the word shofar itself.

Consider the word shofar (שׁופָר). Its letters also spell the world shefer, which means beauty.

Reshuffle those letters, and you have the word rifesh, which means mud.

Each of us is soil and soul, refesh and shefer. We are at the same time lowly creatures of the earth, and children of the Most High.

Now look at the shofar— it has a narrow and broad end. Like a shofar, each of us has a capacity for broadmindedness and spiritual growth, but also for narrow-mindedness and self-indulgence.

Our task in doing teshuvah, repentance, is the difficult but rewarding work of fixing our brakes, of mending our ways and striving for a better life.

It is only in this way that we can move from narrowness towards broadness, from our earthly mire toward divine beauty.

And so, as you listen to the shofar, notice how the powerful sound rises upward — it is beckoning us to follow.

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**BANISH DESPAIR (P. 126)**

This powerful poem, לְאֵל עוֹרֵךְ דִּין, evokes the awesome mood of the day: G-d, who probes our hearts and our thoughts on the Day of Judgment. Yet the intent of the poem is to inspire not fear, but hope and reassurance. Even in judgment, “He reveals His love, remembers His covenant, extends His mercy, answers our prayers, and assures forgiveness and renewal to the truly repentant”!

Human justice may not always be so forgiving. A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense’s closing statement, the lawyer, knowing that the accused would probably be convicted, said, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a big surprise for you all. Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom.” He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly.

A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, “Actually, I made up the previous statement but you all looked on with anticipation. I, therefore, assert that you have a reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed. Given this uncertainty, I have no doubt that you must return a verdict of not guilty.” The jury retired to deliberate. A short while later, they
returned and delivered a verdict of guilt. “But why?” inquired the lawyer. “You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door.”

The jury foreman replied: “Yes, we did all look. But your client didn’t!

On Rosh Hashanah, we are the defendant who stands on trial. But do we act guilty and feel condemned? No! The Code of Jewish Law says, normally, a person being judged, is overcome with anxiety. Nevertheless on Rosh Hashanah, Jews must dress in holiday finery, eat splendid holiday meals, and rejoice, for we must know that G-d forgives, and feel confident that our verdict will be good.

Why are our upbeat moods so important in Jewish Law?

Because when a person is trapped in guilt and despair it is impossible to marshal the inner strength to make a change for the better. If we are to give Rosh Hashanah a chance to change our life, we must banish despair and the path to spiritual defeat that it creates.

Let us heed the reminder of this prayer, and enter the New Year with confidence, new hope and a sense of possibility.

THE BOOK OF LIFE: A RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT OR OF SPILLED YEARS? (P.132)

“And in the book of life, blessing, peace and prosperity…” This brief prayer inserted into the closing section of the Amidah is unique to the High Holy Day season. In it, we ask not just for life itself but also for a life filled with blessing, peace, and prosperity.

The Talmud tells about Eliezer ben Durdaya, who was a sinful man all his life. One day, he had a sudden insight into the depth of his moral corruption and broke down weeping. Remorse surged so suddenly and fiercely that his heart gave way and he died. At that moment, says the Talmud, a heavenly voice called out, “Rabbi Eliezer ben Durdaya is hereby granted eternal life.”

The Talmud continues: When the great Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi heard this story, “ السيد אליעזר בן דורדה הוא מצון בחרי — ‘A person can acquire the World to Come in a single hour.’ But why was Rabbi Yehudah crying? Isn’t it good that Eliezer had such a breakthrough of spirit that he was able to acquire eternity in a single instant? He should have been overjoyed that a person could be given such opportunity that, in one hour, he could change his destiny.

He cried because if Eliezer was able to acquire the World to Come in such a brief period of time, just imagine how much Eliezer could have accomplished had he spent his formidable energy in doing good during all the years of his life.

You see, cancelling the past does not turn it into a record of achievement. It leaves it blank, a waste of spilled years, like a bank account purged of debt but now standing at zero balance. A Jewish sage once said that life is like a postcard. When we first start to write, we use big print, and waste valuable space on clichés: “How are you?” “How is the weather?” “Here it’s very cold…”

But as we approach the end of the card, and realize that we still have not said anything of impor-
tance as we originally intended, we no longer waste our valuable space. Instead, we write carefully, in small letters, sticking only to what is truly essential.

So it is in life itself. We’re not careful early on about accomplishing as much as we can, because we feel that there’s so much time left. But as our life passes, we realize that our time is precious and we try to abandon the trivial and squeeze in at the end as many mitzvot as we can.

But, if you realize now as young students the value of time, you can utilize the time you do have for what is truly significant. And so on the High Holy Days we ask G-d not just to write us into the Book of Life, but to help us write a life worth reading. We ask for a life filled with Divine energy, goodness, prosperity and blessing. We ask G-d for another year not merely to live, but to grow Jewishly, to love and to give.

אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ

WE ARE LIKE COLLEGE STUDENTS (PP. 152-153)

Each sentence in this prayer begins with the words “Avinu Malkenu, Our Father, Our King.” G-d is described as a merciful parent, full of compassion for his children. But G-d is also described as a demanding king whose love must be earned.

There is a difference between “parental love” and “kingly love.” Parental love says: “You are borne of my flesh and blood, and I will always love you no matter what. Nothing you ever do or fail to do will make me stop loving you.” It is an unconditional love.

Kingly love, on the other hand, says: “I will love you if you earn my love and respect, if you accomplish big things, if you make the government run well, the treasury overflow, and the army strong.”

It may seem at first glance that parental love is the more genuine and noble, while kingly love is harsh and conditional (I will only love you if...). A moment’s reflection, however, tells us that we also want and need to hear the king’s message: that we are loved because we deserve it, not just because G-d is generous enough to put up with us. We want G-d to love us as other people love us, because we deserve it, not because G-d and the other people in our lives merely tolerate us.

We are like the college student who hands in a paper and wants the professor to read it carefully and critically, because he or she has worked so hard to make it good. The college student would be profoundly disappointed by the response, “that’s all right, you’ve produced rubbish but I really didn’t expect much from you anyway.”

Thus, this prayer imparts to us a central message that G-d speaks to us in two voices. One is the firm, commanding voice of “Malkenu,” issuing from the mountaintop, thundering, “Thou shall! and “Thou shalt not!” summoning us to be more, do more, to reach higher, to demand greater things of ourselves, forbidding us the easy excuse of “I’m only human,” because to be human is a wondrous thing.

G-d’s other voice is the voice of “Avinu,” of compassion and forgiveness, an embracing, cleansing voice, assuring us that when we have aimed high and fallen short, we are still loved. G-d knows
what a complicated story a human life is and loves us despite our mistakes. All he asks is that we fix what we damaged — to do teshuvah and begin fresh.

אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ. מַלֵּא יָדֵינוּ מִבִּרְכֶּךָ

**HOW MUCH LAND DOES A MAN NEED?** (PP. 153)

We have prayed, “Our Father, our King. Inscribe us in the book of livelihood and sustenance.” We now add to this the prayer: מַלֵּא יָדֵינוּ מִבִּרְכֶּךָ that G-d should “fill our hands with His blessings” This second prayer may appear a bit redundant but it is not.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story about a successful farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything. One day he received a fantastic offer. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk on before sunset.

So, at the break of dawn, he began to walk. As he surveyed the vast stretch of land that was to be his, he began to yearn for yet more. So he hastened his pace, and began to run. He was getting weary. His heart was beating heavily, his feet were aching. But he wanted just a bit more, just a few acres more. The sun began to set and he began stumbling in utter exhaustion. Still he had to have just another bit more. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body. And as the last rays of the sun were sinking behind the horizon, he finally collapsed from exhaustion. He stretched out his hands, straining to cover yet another few inches. “This, too, is mine,” were his dying words.

Afterward, his servants dug a grave. It was about six feet long. The title of Tolstoy’s story was: “How Much Land Does A Man Need?”

The message I get from that story is that human nature is insatiable. We are never completely satisfied with what we have. Whatever our nature desires — money, power, possessions, pleasure or success — there is never an end-point at which we feel we have enough. But the relentless drive for more and more is ultimately fatal.

This part of human nature is the greatest obstacle to happiness – precisely because it is insatiable. This is where our mind has to tell our nature, “Enough! Be content!” How many of us spend our lives always trying to grasp for just a little more? How many of us don’t pause to use our gains, to celebrate the blessing we have for the benefit of others, or even for ourselves?

It is against the background of this deep human struggle that the words of this prayer make complete sense. We have prayed, for “sustenance and support.” We add to this the prayer מַלֵּא יָדֵינוּ מִבִּרְכֶּךָ that G-d should “fill our hands with His blessings”, that is, that we should feel satiated and not drive ourselves to destruction with insatiable pursuits. G-d helps us realize that we don’t need to stretch out our hands to cover yet another inch, because our hands are already filled by His blessings.
This phrase comes from the famous Biblical episode that took place on Mount Sinai several centuries after the giving of the Torah. The prophet Elijah, stood on the same mountain and confronted the false prophets of Baal. We learn that during this dramatic confrontation, there was a great wind, an earthquake and a fire — but that G-d was not in any of these loud displays.

Then came the "kol demama daka," "a still small voice". That is where G-d was heard.

Even among human beings, majesty and grandeur are often truly denoted by "a still small voice." A film critic once defined the difference between an ordinary actor and a star in this way: "At the Academy Awards, the crowd standing outside cheers every actor who walks into the building. But when a real star appears, the crowd quiets to a hush, and they point and whisper to each other, "Matisyahu!" That awe is the reaction to a real star.

Now listen to this. The Talmud tells a story about Rav Sheshet, who was blind.

Once, the entire population of the rabbi’s city went out to welcome the Emperor of the land. Rav Sheshet went along with the people.

One of the bystanders scoffed, and remarked to Rav Sheshet that his presence was a waste, since, being blind, he wouldn’t be able to tell when the great emperor passed by.

The rabbi said to him, "תא חזי דידענא טפי מינך" — "You will see that my sight is sharper than yours."

As the first legion approached, a tumultuous noise was heard, and the scoffer shouted, "The Emperor is here!"

But Rav Sheshet said, "That is not him."

A second legion approached, again the crowd cheered.

Again the scoffer exclaimed, "The Emperor is here!"

Rabbi Sheshet said, "The Emperor has not yet arrived."

At last, a third legion appeared, and there was a pervasive hush, and Rav Sheshet said, "Now the emperor is approaching."

And indeed, behind the legion came the majestic ruler and his entourage.

"מה לדך?" — "How did you know?" asked the man.

Rabbi Sheshet said, "You can tell because true earthly majesty, like heavenly majesty, makes its appearance with the dignity of a still, small voice."
In our society we confuse fame with importance. But they have nothing to do with one another. The famous are rarely important, and the important are rarely famous.

The unsung heroes of our hospitals, schools and communities, the moms and dads who perform daily deeds of kindness and love — these people are not famous, but they are truly important. Their efforts may not be dramatic like Elijah’s earthquake, fire and wind, but they are as G-dly as the still, small voice that followed.

יהו הolson עולם

ORIGINAL FORGIVENESS! (P. 210)

One of the central prayers of the High Holidays is: “ָהיִמְנָה עֶלֶם” — “Today the universe was born.” But according to some sages, it was not the world but rather the first human beings who were created on Rosh Hashanah. The Midrash gives us an extraordinary account of what happened on that first Rosh Hashanah when Adam and Eve were created:

“In the first hour, G-d decided to create humanity; in the second, G-d consulted with the angels concerning the creation of human beings; and in the third hour, G-d gathered earth from which humanity was fashioned…” and so on.

What happened in the final hours of that first day?

The Midrash says: “In the ninth hour, G-d commanded them not to eat from the forbidden tree. In the tenth hour, they disobeyed G-d’s command (becoming the first substance abusers in history). In the eleventh hour, they were judged. Finally in the twelfth hour, G-d forgave them.”

That’s a pretty dramatic twist, isn’t it? Up to now this has been a story of corruption and judgment—but then all of a sudden, in the last hour, forgiveness? But it gets better. The Midrash continues:

G-d said to Adam and Eve, “You are a symbol and a hope for future generations. Just as you stood in judgment before Me on this day, so will your descendants be judged by Me. Just as you were pardoned, so will your descendants emerge with a full pardon.”

Isn’t this remarkable?

Much of the world associates the Adam and Eve story with the idea of original sin, of humanity’s grim fate. But according to this Midrash, the story of Adam and Eve is not about “Original Sin”— it is about “Original Forgiveness!”

G-d does not say: “From now on your descendants will be fallen, corrupt, tainted by original sin.” He says the opposite, “Just as you were forgiven, on this day so will your descendants emerge with full forgiveness.”

Judaism doesn’t believe that humanity is inherently evil, tainted with original sin. But Judaism also doesn’t believe that we’re naturally all good, or that it is easy to overcome our negative instincts. Instead Judaism teaches that G-d gave us freedom, and so we always have a choice — as Adam and Eve had — between the Kosher and forbidden, good and evil, life and death. And the
fact that we have a choice and the temptation that may accompany it, means that we’ll sometimes make mistakes. G-d knows we will not be perfect. So on the birthday of mankind, He created teshuvah, repentance, and forgiveness.

G-d says something like this: I did not expect you to be perfect. All I ask of you when you get it wrong is to acknowledge that you did wrong, do teshuvah, apologize, repair what you have harmed, and commit not to make the same mistake again.

On Rosh Hashanah we are like Adam and Eve. We may have sinned, but we are not fallen. What we did may have been wrong, but we are still intact, still loved by G-d, still His children. We can gain forgiveness and start anew. We always remain in the presence of G-d who lifts us up when we stumble and never despairs of our personal redemption.9

WE WRITE IN THE BOOK OF LIFE (P. 223)

There is a novel about a man who travels back in time to try to prevent the Titanic from sinking. He warns the captain that there are icebergs ahead. But the captain dismisses him, saying “Don’t worry about it. We’re professionals and we know what we’re doing.”

In desperation, he gets someone to distract the captain for a few minutes, and turns the ship’s steering wheel a few degrees to the right.

What he doesn’t know is that the captain told him not to worry because he had already been warned about the iceberg and had adjusted the ship accordingly, and our hero had just moved the ship back into line with it.

This is not a Jewish story. This story suggests that everything is pre-determined. It relieves us of responsibility. Nothing that ever happens is our fault. Somebody smarter than us wrote the script and we do what the script called for. Have a nice crash.

But Judaism rejects that way of looking at things. It refuses to absolve us of responsibility. On the contrary, the glory of a human being is his or her sense of responsibility.

This is what we will chant in one of the most powerful of all the High Holiday prayers, Unetaneh Tokef.

The Prayer describes how G-d sits on his throne of justice and writes down the fate of all his creatures on Rosh Hashanah sealing the decree on Yom Kippur. But the prayer concludes that with:

“Repentance, Prayer and Righteous Acts we have the power to transform any bad decree!”

What are these High Holy Days about if not the possibility of change, so that next year won’t be a repeat of the past year. We can change our behaviour, we can change the way we relate to the people around us, and our lives will change. And G-d helps and blesses us and our efforts.
The insistent message of Judaism is: Choose Life! You choose life. Nobody else is doing the choosing for you. You choose between good and bad, between healthy and unhealthy, between kindness and self-indulgence, between mitzvah and sin.

Notice how in the, Netaneh Tokef it says that when the great Book of Life is opened in Heaven:

“והחתם יד כל אדם בו — the entries are in our own handwriting”.

We each write our own notes in the book of life. The message is that we get to edit this book, we get to erase mistakes and revise it. And the next chapter has not yet been written; G-d is waiting for us to write it, based on our choices, our priorities, our decisions. We are co-author with G-d in the story of our life.

We don’t come to shul and say to G-d “While You’ve got the Book of Life open, could I peek at the final chapter to see how it comes out? And if not the last chapter, can I at least peak at next Friday’s stock tables?”

But if we did, I imagine that G-d would tell us that there is really nothing there to look at. The next chapter of our lives has yet to be written. The only pages in our Book of Our Life that have been filled are the ones we already know about, the ones we’ve already written.

And even the bad story lines in those chapters, G-d says, can be wiped away with “Repentance, Prayer and Righteous Acts.”

ושתובה והפלת אכדה מעבריי אתח רצ الهندра

Our fate is not in the stars, our fate is in our hands. May G-d grant that we choose well, may G-d grant us a good and a sweet year of life!
Among the many references to the idea that on Rosh Hashanah we are given the opportunity to repent and win Divine forgiveness, is this phrase found in the Kiddush for Rosh Hashanah, as well as in the Kedushat Hayom of the Amidah: *Udevarecha emet vekayyam laad* ("Your word is true and stands forever"). This is a reference to the Midrashic account, just cited, of the forgiveness extended to Adam on the first Rosh Hashanah. The "word" is the promise that, through repentance, man will always be given the opportunity to win Divine forgiveness.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Likkutei Dibburim - Volume 2, pg. 361.
3. See, Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh HaShanah, Chapter 1 and see, Tur, Orach Chaim 581.
4. Avodah Zarah 17a.
5. I Kings 19: 11-12.