

THE GIFT OF TIME

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Rosh Hashana presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, it has a most solemn character as the Day of Judgment and the start of the Ten Days of Repentance. On the other hand, it is a Yom Tov whose observance calls for festive meals and a spirit of happiness and optimism. We rejoice at the opportunity to embrace a new year, while demonstrating our confidence that it will be a sweet and joyous one. The various simonim that bedeck the table reinforce the day's festive character; yet we are profoundly conscious, at the same time, of the weighty responsibility that comes with the gift of a new year.

In a day-long burst of inspiration, we combine a diverse range of heartfelt emotions as we commit ourselves to channel our new flow of energy appropriately.

I recall accompanying a Legacy group to New York on New Year's Eve many years ago. The group wanted to taste the excitement and spirit of ushering in the new year in the Big Apple. It turned out to be quite an anti-climax. So many people were stumbling about in an alcohol-induced stupor in order to stimulate some artificial joy. Their laughter rang hollow. I recall grabbing the hands of the guys on the trip and dancing through the streets to a lively Hasidic song. The onlookers clapped and cheered, sure that we were high on booze. Afterwards, we sat down together and analyzed the revelry of New Year's Eve in sharp contrast to our Rosh HaShana celebration with its profound lesson about the value of time, and the uplifting impact of this day on our lives.

Time is undoubtedly the most precious of all of life's blessings. It is the essential tool for growth and progress. As abstract and intangible as time is, we all recognize that it is priceless, for time means life and what is more important than life?

Yet, time is also a kind of adversary. The passage of time stimulates feelings of regret that we did not use our time more productively. In mid-life, we can become engulfed with feelings of regret that our potential has been squandered. Perhaps that is why people take refuge in frivolous revelry at milestones that mark the passage of time. That flight from reality is a way of escaping a sense of emptiness that often taints milestone occasions.

Our Rosh HaShana celebration couldn't be more different. Although we are cognizant of the past, we do not dwell there; it is never our point of focus. The past is relevant only insofar as we can glean lessons from it to apply to the future.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for year is "shana," which is linked to the word "shinuy," meaning

change. For time to be used productively, it must be accompanied by growth and change. In another allusion to the concept of time being linked to accomplishment, the Hebrew word for time, "Zman," is connected to the word "Zimun," prepared, for every moment of time is embedded with a built-in potential for greatness and achievement.

On Rosh Hashana, we express the joy of reawakened identity, confident in our fresh commitment to utilize the coming year-especially its gift of time-to its full potential.

This important perspective is well illustrated in the following story about an elderly, devout Hasidic Jew who was a disciple of the famed Rebbe of Kotzk. His most precious and valuable possession in his sparsely furnished apartment was a pair of tefillin, a family heirloom written by the legendary scribe, Rav Nechmia, who lived in Warsaw in the seventeenth century. The elderly Hasid's children were very eager to see the beautiful script on the parchment inside the tefillin boxes. One day, without their father's knowledge, they secretly took the tefillin to a scribe to be delicately opened so that they could feast their eyes on the family treasure.

To their horror, they found that water had penetrated one of the boxes, making one line of the script wholly illegible and invalidating the tefillin. They were in a deep quandary. How could they break the tragic news to their frail father that the precious tefillin he had received on his Bar Mitzvah were not kosher? The oldest son was chosen to bear the sad tidings and he cautiously approached his father, not sure of how he would react.

Upon hearing that the tefillin were not kosher, the old man jumped up, clapped his hands and started to sing a lively melody. He paused to explain the reason for his joy to his bemused children. "How wonderful," he exclaimed, "it seems that all my adult life I never donned a kosher pair of tefillin, and I might never have known. Finally, in my old age, I've been privileged to perform this sacred mitzvah correctly! What a chesed!"

His sincere words encapsulate the message of our Rosh Hashana celebration and New Year's resolve. From Hashem's hands we once again receive the gift of time. What a momentous occasion. What was-is in the past! A new era is about to begin. New vistas, new opportunities, new horizons, fresh rejuvenation and a fresh appreciation of the gift of life itself. Let us use these priceless gifts in the best possible way. Wishing you a healthy, sweet and prosperous new year!

Sincerely,

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