



Rosh Hashana 2023

Symbols Matter

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the highlights of the Jewish calendar is the Rosh Hashana seder, where it is customary to eat some fun symbolic foods.

Dip the apple in the honey is a timeless classic with an iconic song for a sweet new year, and every community has countless others with puns and wordplay in every language, from bananas, beans, beets, dates, and fish; to leeks, pomegranates, pumpkins, and sometimes a whole lamb head.

What turns the simple food into a time-honored tradition is the small ritual or prayer that accompanies it: apples are sweet, so we wish for a sweet year. Pomegranates are full of seeds, so we wish to be full of good deeds. The head is where the brain is, so we pray to be leaders, not followers. French-speaking communities eat a banana – which they pronounce like “Bonne Année,” the French greeting for “Happy New Year.”

This all sounds like good-natured, light-hearted fun, and it is.

But it's more than that too.

Our sages affirmed that symbolism matters – סימנא מלתא.

Symbolism plays an essential role in human culture. Through symbols, we find meaning in the physical world, which becomes transparent and reveals the transcendent. Certain symbols are cultural universals, primal archetypes intuitively understood that derive from the unconscious and require no explanation, like mother and child or light and darkness.

History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes – our ancestors' history foreshadows and symbolizes a possible future – מעשה אבות סימן לבנים.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that these symbols are meant to bring our thoughts and aspirations into the world of action. We dip the apple in the honey and sing and smile, but it actually functions as a placeholder for a universal blessing for a sweet new year.

When Israel's prophets would warn the Jews of impending exile, they wouldn't just talk about doom. They would also incorporate a symbolic visual representation of some kind, offering an experience of the prophecy through action and primary experience rather than mere words alone. When Jeremiah



told of the burdens that lay ahead, he wore a cattle yoke; When Isaiah spoke about the people's exposure and vulnerability, he walked around nearly naked. When Ezekiel spoke of the dirty and poor nutrition the Jewish People would experience, he baked a kind of inferior bread over human excrement. The action was not just an eccentric restatement of the message; it was a crucial part of their duty to warn.

These symbols initiate action in the external world, starting the process of realizing our thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams.

The apple and honey are staples at every Rosh Hashana table, accompanied by a prayer that the year ahead be good but also sweet. Because not everything sweet is good, and not everything good is sweet – תְּחַדֵּשׁ עֲלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה –

Pomegranates are the next most popular symbol; they're full of seeds, so we wish to be full of good deeds and merits. It's not a request for artificial inflation; it's a request for more opportunities to grow our merits, that they compound and mature like a well-managed investment portfolio.

Although probably not the most appetizing of symbols, some communities eat a small piece of a fish head or lamb head, with a wish to be among the heads and not the tails – שָׁנֵהֲיָהּ לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב –

When looking at an animal, it may seem like the head and tail are the same, just a body length apart.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that, actually, although the tail can occupy the same physical space as the head, it can never occupy the same conceptual space because the head leads, and the tail only ever follows.

While we can't control all the circumstances, variables, and people that are part of our lives, we always get to choose and exercise our free will. While we can't choose to be happy, healthy, or successful, we can choose to take steps towards making those things more possible and likely.

In other words, all we can choose is what we choose.

If choices define you, and you are a passenger to someone else's preferences, you are functionally their tail; floating with the current is not the same as swimming.

R' Shimshon Pinkus explained it as a wish for a year that is intentional – לְרֹאשׁ; with a forward state of becoming, with constant course corrections – שָׁנֵהֲיָהּ; because if your actions today are based on yesterday's decisions, you end up being your own tail!

Symbols matter.



There is a good reason that these symbols are profoundly beloved and universally accepted in every Jewish home.

These symbols initiate action in the external world, starting the process of realizing our thoughts, wishes, hopes, and dreams.

Make sure you're doing all you can to make them come true.

Transcending Time

3 minute read | Straightforward

From Rosh Hashana through Sukkos, honey features prominently at the festive meals. Honey is sweet, and it functions as a symbol for the sweet new year we yearn for.

But think about it for a moment, using honey is odd. Honey is sweet, but it comes from bees, which have a painful sting and are not kosher creatures.

Honey is a complex sugar; why don't we use simple cane sugar, a naturally growing plant that metabolizes into the energy that fuels all living things?

The universe operates on fundamental laws of physics that express empirical facts and describe physical properties of how the natural universe works. One such law is the law of entropy, which describes how natural states tend to undergo increasing decay and disorder over time. Eventually, all things break down.

The Midrash suggests that the notion of Teshuva predates the universe, which suggests that it is of a higher order that transcends its constraints; Teshuva is above space and time, and therefore not subject to entropy.

Creation is an environment where humans can make choices. The nature of a test is that it is challenging; you can pass or fail. As much as God can want us to pass a test, the objective fact remains that tests can and will be failed. But God is not gratuitously cruel and does not set us up to fail; the fact we can fail necessarily requires the existence of Teshuva, so failure is not the end. A person can learn from their mistakes, put it behind them, and move on.

R' Nechemia Sheinfeld explains that the supernatural aspect of Teshuva is that it unwinds the effect of time and entropy; we can repair our mistakes, removing the decay, leaving only the lesson we have



learned. Teshuva is not an after-the-fact solution; it's baked into the fabric of the creation process, so redemption is structurally possible from the outset.

Existence without Teshuva would be static and stagnant – there would be no recovery from failure or setbacks, no growth, and therefore no life. Teshuva must predate existence, because that's the only way life can change and become.

With Teshuva, sins and transgressions can be recategorized based on motivation. When Teshuva is motivated by fear, sins are downgraded to accidents and oversights; when motivated by love, sins can become merits. It's intuitive; the way a person adapts their past mistakes materially affects the way you incorporate the lessons learned to be a better person.

It's a bit like learning to ride a bicycle. The first time you lose your balance, you fall and hurt yourself. Maybe next time you wear a helmet and pads, and you slowly learn how to keep your balance. If you focus on how bad falling hurts, you'll never learn to ride the bike. But once you learn to keep your balance, you forget about falling, and maybe you don't need the pads anymore. You now know how to ride a bicycle.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that this is why the Hebrew word for “year” – שנה – is cognate to the words שני and שנוי – “secondary” and “change” respectively. Today's achievements are built on the foundations of yesterday; a repetition would be no different from what came first, and a fresh start can't carry the lessons along the way. This may help explain why we temporarily behave more diligently day between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – a reliable foundation is the precursor of a strong building.

R' Meir Shapiro teaches that this is why specifically honey, and not sugar, is the centerpiece of the holiday imagery. Honey is kosher, despite being a product of non-kosher origins, and maybe you get stung. It's complex, not simple. But doesn't that sound a lot like Teshuvah? You made mistakes that weren't so kosher, maybe they stung a little, and they weren't so simple, but you can learn and grow from them all the same – you've made something kosher from something that's not.

As R' Nachman of Breslov taught straightforwardly: if you believe you can break, then believe you can fix.



How to Pray

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is deeply personal, and everyone prays in their own way.

While there are different approaches to precisely how prayer works or what it affects, we assume that the omnipresent and omniscient God is listening, and we know that not every prayer is answered in the way we might hope.

We intuitively understand that the Creator is the Source of all blessing, the final and only destination for all our hopes and dreams. The stakes couldn't be higher – the Creator holds all the cards and pulls all the strings, with the power of life and death and everything in between.

So it's important to pray properly so God will listen.

What are the requirements of a proper prayer that God will listen to?

If you think need righteous and holy saints to pray for you and bless you, you might be surprised because the Torah plainly states otherwise.

In the story of Yitzchak's life, the Torah recounts how his mother Sarah identified the older Yishmael as a corruptive influence on the young Yitzchak, and she sent Yishmael and his mother Hagar away from the family home.

The Torah tells how Hagar and Yishmael wandered, lost in the wilderness, until they ran out of water, and Yishmael slowly dehydrated. Knowing no one was coming to the rescue and with certainty that her son would die suffering, she cried out in complete and utter despair – וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ.

Completely and utterly miraculously, the Torah tells how Hagar received a vision of a nearby oasis, and she rushes to get the water she needs to save her son.

This seems to conform with our conventional understanding of prayer; the desperate mother crying for her suffering child.

But the Torah does not give credit to Hagar. An angel speaks with her and tells her that everything is going to be okay because the Creator has listened to the prayer – but not Hagar's:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת קוֹל הַנְּעִר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְּאֵךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִר בְּאֶרֶץ שָׁמַיִם – God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven, and said to her: “Don't worry, Hagar; God has heard the voice of the boy in his state.” (21:16)



God listens to Yishmael's prayer, not Hagar's – כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר –

The story never ascribes an action or a word to Yishmael; he is a passive object in the story, the object of his mother's prayers, the person acted upon, and not the actor.

A mother's tears for her dying son did not move the heavens. But what moved the heavens was the voice of a dying boy, and he never even says a word! Perhaps, in his suffering, he cried or sighed; not even significant enough for the Torah to record it as an action he took.

That literally invisible moment of pain or sadness is what drives the entire story and goes on to shape history, and perhaps it should shape our understanding of prayer.

There are no requirements to pray properly; you just have to mean it, and you don't have to be anyone or anything special. You can just be a kid, and you can just cry because it hurts.

The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are – בְּאִשְׁרֵי הוּא נִשְׁמָע.

The story of Yishmael teaches us that prayer isn't confined to ritualized formalities, and maybe that's partly why we read this story on Rosh Hashana.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. You don't need to know how to pray or understand the words.

Our sages conclude from the stories of our ancestors that God loves righteous prayers – הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא – מתאוה לתפילתן של צדיקים. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that God loves righteous prayers, not prayers of the righteous – תפילתן של צדיקים / תפילת צדיקים –

You don't have to be perfect to generate a perfect prayer. Our daily prayers affirm that God is close to the people who call on Him truthfully – יקרואוהו באמת – לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת, לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת. It is not beyond any of us to ask for help and truly mean it – יקרואוהו באמת –

Everyone is capable of a one-off, pure prayer.

Just a single moment of pain from a suffering boy moved the heavens. It is not beyond us.



Take Responsibility

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the core themes of the High Holy Days is God's capacity for and predisposition towards forgiveness, culminating in the day designated and named for forgiveness, Yom Kippur.

But as much as we believe God will forgive anyone, we also believe in the prerequisite requirement to show up and take responsibility. As R' Jonathan Sacks teaches, forgiveness can only exist where repentance exists; and repentance can only exist where responsibility exists.

Responsibility is a uniquely human quality; it suggests a duty or obligation that can sometimes be burdensome and make you uncomfortable. The Rambam notes that reward and punishment only make sense if humans have moral agency and free choice; or in other words, responsibility. Without choice, it would be unfair and wrong for God to hold you responsible for bad things you did because you were incapable of choosing otherwise; responsibility only exists alongside the ability to choose how to act.

Taking responsibility is the theme of one of the most prominent prayers of the High Holy Days, as well as the span of days before and in between, the Viduy prayer, where everyone publicly confesses a litany of misdemeanors, sins, and wrongdoings while they beat their hearts. There is something beautiful about the entire Jewish people publicly taking responsibility, acknowledging their failures and weaknesses together, and publicly undertaking to do better, even if you're alone or with total strangers.

It's beautiful enough that many communities have the custom of singing the confession prayer in tune. It's not the most upbeat song, but there is an element of happiness and joy in confessing our failings.

The confession isn't a performative theatrical ritual; honestly acknowledging that you did something wrong is the only way you can begin to fix it. Beyond than being a key technical component of Teshuva, confession is how we take responsibility.

As R' Shlomo Farhi reminds us, taking responsibility transforms how a slight is observed. If you go to a shopping center with piles of rubble, you won't go back; but you'd feel differently if the store hung signs asking you to excuse their appearance while they undergo renovations scheduled for completion by April. The acknowledgment makes you more patient and forgiving that the experience was below expectations.

By confessing to a list of severe transgressions that largely – hopefully – don't apply to you, perhaps it makes it easier for you to acknowledge some of your genuine shortcomings and makes you a little



more empathetic to those of the people in your life; we're all human, and like you, we have all made mistakes.

But perhaps beyond taking responsibility with the Jewish People, it's also partly a confession of responsibility for the Jewish People; our sages teach that the Jewish People are responsible for each other, and we confess in the collective plural – אשמנו.

Who have we let down? For every lost soul, every hurt soul, every at-risk teen, every struggling family – how do communal structures and systems enables these outcomes, what does the community do or not do, and what can we do different and hopefully better next time round? Think whose pain you're not seeing or hearing – בגדנו.

We ought to consider the advice we have given over the year, what guidance our leaders and institutions have given our brothers and sisters, evaluating any negative consequences as part of our responsibility for others – יעצנו רע.

It can only be different or better if you take responsibility and do something about it. Not only is not knowing not an excuse; errors, omissions, and mistakes over things that aren't your fault are a feature of the confession prayer itself – על חטא שחטאנו ביודעים ובלא יודעים / בבלי דעת / בשגגה –

If whatever is wrong isn't your fault, then you can't do anything differently next time, and nothing can change; it would be impossible to move on and heal from anything wrong with you. You can only do better next time if you can take responsibility.

If you've seen two kids playing rough until they get hurt, you know it doesn't matter if it was a mistake; head injuries don't require intention, and nor do the things we all do that wind up hurting others.

And if you won't take responsibility, you are performing empty confession theater, which, with a large scoop of irony, is also a part of the confession prayer – ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך בידוי פה –

Accept responsibility for your actions. Be accountable for your results. Take ownership of your mistakes – including the ones that weren't your fault.

There's nothing easy about taking responsibility for yourself – it requires enormous reserves of honesty and strength to confront the realization that you are the one that's been holding yourself back this whole time.

When you take responsibility for yourself, you can stop relying on others to take responsibility for you. You should want to take responsibility for yourself, your life, your family, your friends, your community, and all the people who need you.



A group's long-term success depends to a large extent on its leader's willingness to take responsibility for failure; our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, citing the time Moshe intervened to save the Jewish People after the Golden Calf, acknowledging his people's responsibility for the calamity, and taking responsibility for saving them:

סלח-נא לעון העם הזה כגדל חסדך וכאשר נשאתה לעם הזה ממצרים ועד-הנה. ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך: – “Please pardon the sin of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.” And God said, “I have pardoned, as you have asked.” (14:19,20)

There is a good reason to sing the confession, and it's the same reason we sing that repentance, charity, and prayer have the power to change the future.

The moment you take responsibility for everything is the moment you can change anything.

The Binding of Isaac Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

The Binding of Isaac, the Akeida, is one of the most challenging stories in the Torah. Our best and brightest sages and philosophers have grappled with it since time immemorial, and with good reason.

The Torah is the source code for what we understand to be moral. Yet God asks Avraham to murder his son, and the Torah confronts the reader with a fundamental question: can God ask us to do something immoral and wrong?

The story concludes with a retraction of the notion that Avraham would need to follow through and kill his son in God's name. God is impressed that Avraham doesn't withhold his son, and we come away understanding that God does not ask us to do the unethical. In stopping Avraham at the very last moment, God drives home the point that there is no sanctity in child sacrifice and death; this God is different. This God is the God of life.

But while the ending is illuminating, the way we interpret the story up until the reversal matters.

To be sure, there is a diverse spectrum of legitimate discourse; we should evaluate their relative standing with regard to the values they teach. The ramifications of what we teach our children are enormously consequential, so we need to get it right.

If we think about God's instruction and say that up until the final moment, God truly meant it and only then changed His mind, then it destroys our conceptualization of universal ethics and morality



because they are ad hoc and fluid; morality is only whatever God says it is from one moment to the next.

If we were to think that Avraham truly and simply desired to obey God and sacrifice his son and that he regretted not being able to obey God's command, then the whole story makes no sense. Child sacrifice was common in that era – if Avraham was willing to murder his son, it destroys the entire notion of his great sacrifice! More pointedly, if Avraham was all too willing to murder his son, it destroys Avraham as any sort of role model, and it would be perverse to teach children that this is what greatness looks like.

But of course, apart from the fact these interpretations leave us in moral turpitude, they also make no sense in the broader context of the Torah, which explicitly condemns child sacrifice on multiple occasions.

By necessity, we need to reject the notion that Avraham truly and simply wished to sacrifice Yitzchak. The story only makes sense if it was hard – excruciatingly hard, and fortunately, that's very much the story the Torah tells. At no point does the story suggest that this is easy for Avraham, and actually, quite the opposite.

Until this point in Avraham's life, his commitment to life and commitment to God were in perfect harmony – God wanted Avraham to be good to others, and he was. Now that God asked him to sacrifice his son, he had a dilemma because his two great commitments were no longer in alignment:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק דְּאֶשְׁרֵי-אֵהָבֶתְךָ אֶת-יָצִיחֶק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ... בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשָׂא אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-עַיְנָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק... וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמְּאֻכָּלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת-בְּנֹו וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק דְּאֶשְׁרֵי-אֵהָבֶתְךָ אֶת-יָצִיחֶק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ... בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי – And He said, “Please take your son, your favored one, Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you...” On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place from afar... And Avraham sent his hand and picked up the knife to slay his son. (22:2,4,10)

The Ran highlights out that God never commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son; God only requests it – “Please” – קַח-נָא. This is not an instruction that demands obedience; it is a request that does not mandate compliance.

As Avraham struggled with turmoil about the position he was in, he looked up and saw the mountain in the distance – וַיֵּשָׂא אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-עַיְנָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרֶחֶק. The Nesivos Shalom notes that there is a reference to one of God's names, the Omnipresent, the attribute that God is everywhere and the place of all things – הַמָּקוֹם. In this reading, the whole affair felt wrong to Avraham. He'd opposed human sacrifice pagan worship his whole life, and yet here he was, about to destroy his life's work and snuff out his family legacy. He felt alienated and distanced from God – וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרֶחֶק.



At the story's dramatic crescendo, the Torah uses remarkable imagery to characterize what took place. Avraham does not simply pick up the knife; he “forces his hand” – וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֹת – The Torah dissociates Avraham from his disembodied hand because Avraham was resisting what he was doing.

The Kotzker suggests that even to the musculoskeletal level, the cumbersome description of Avraham's belabored muscle movements truly expressed and mirrored God's desire that Yitzchak would remain unharmed – כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי תֵּאֱמָרְנָה –

Lastly, R' Shlomo Farhi notes that Avraham's entire characterization in this story is lethargic, illustrating the slow heaviness with which he moves through the story. But lethargy runs counter to everything we know about Avraham up to this point! He is introduced to us as someone who eagerly and enthusiastically goes where God tells him, who runs after guests to invite them in, and who hurries to feed them. In this story, he is in stark contrast with his energetic fervent self because he faces the greatest challenge of his life, and it is antithetical to his very being.

Of course, we know how the story ends. God would never ask us to do something unethical. But how we tell the story matters just as much as how it ends.

This gut-wrenching story of moral turmoil is held in the highest esteem by humans and by God. And that's because it wasn't easy. It is not a story about blind faith and obedience but the exact opposite.

It is all too rare that we face a moral choice that is truly black and white. Most of the time, it's not a starving orphaned widow with cancer whose house burned down, knocking on the door asking for help. Far more often, we face a difficult choice between competing ideals, none of which will resolve the situation in a manner that perfectly aligns with an established code of ethics or norms.

Will we tell the truth and be honest when confronted, or keep a secret and loyally honor a promise? Will we prioritize individual needs to greatly help a few or communal needs to adequately help many? Will we be just, fair, and equal in our relationships, or will we be compassionate and merciful based on each circumstance? Will we prioritize the present or the future?

We would do well to remember our role models. They weren't primitive people – they were refined humans doing their best to ethically navigate a world of murky choices. And while society may have changed in form, it hasn't changed in substance, and humans haven't changed much at all.

Doing the right thing is plenty hard enough; but you first have to identify what the right thing truly is, which is far harder. It gets to the core of our mission in life, and we must take strength from the stories of our greats – this is the way it's always been, and we must persevere all the same.



Quite tellingly, we read this story on Rosh Hashana. Sure, we read it in part to recall the great merit of our ancestors, and perhaps that is a complete reason. But perhaps it can also remind us that the greats also had their struggles with no clean choices.

High Holy Days Redux

5 minute read | Advanced

As the leaves begin to turn and the air carries the crisp promise of autumn, Jews around the world prepare for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the days of judgment and atonement.

As the sacred words of our liturgy call out, these are the moments when destiny hangs in the balance. As one of the most moving prayers asks of us, will the year ahead hold health or sickness, safety or insecurity, laughter or tears, power or helplessness? The very books of life and death lie open, awaiting a verdict.

These prayers have stirred and moved our people for generations since antiquity and retain their emotional sharpness. For many, it is a powerful time.

However, there's one problem staring us right in the face: the central premise upon which these days seem to be built just isn't true.

One might argue that a linear universe governed by straightforward principles and predictable outcomes reflects Divine wisdom and control. In a linear world, moral choices are clear; if we make amends and do better, then everything will be okay. Many people believe this, and we should let them!

But for everyone else, this is an age-old problem thinkers have engaged with and been troubled by – theodicy, the problem of evil. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Or, to frame it differently, why don't bad things happen to bad people? After all, it's the central premise of the High Holy Days.

If you take a cohort of the objectively nastiest people and conduct a longitudinal study monitoring them over a few years, most would probably not face cosmic retribution; they would continue to live and perhaps even flourish. In many cases, life would go on for them, devoid of any tangible form of the kind of divine justice promised by the High Holy Days. This incongruence challenges the philosophical underpinnings of our beliefs and, on the most basic fundamental level, offends our innate sense of fairness and balance and can leave us feeling spiritually drift.



But taking this presumption to its logical conclusion reveals its critical weakness. That's not how the universe works; that's not how it's ever worked, or at least not since the prophets stopped speaking.

In reality, most bad people will make it to next year, and some of the best will be gone too soon. This has always been true; that's just how it goes. If you get caught up in questions like this, it's easy to miss the forest for the trees.

In all of our stories, none of our heroes, from Avraham to Moshe, seem to exist in a universe that operates with linear justice. Even for the perfectly and completely righteous, life doesn't suddenly become easy or straightforward.

And yet, the worldview of a universe governed by linear justice is openly endorsed by the liturgy — sin and punishment, cause and effect, action and consequence. This model doesn't resonate with anyone paying even the slightest attention to the world around them and the people in it.

In a universe of swirling complexity where every particle dances to the rhythm of quantum mechanics and uncertainty principles, the notion of linearity seems almost quaint. Complexity is all we know, inviting us to engage with life's ambiguities and explore its mysteries, driving our spiritual and moral development. In the intricate landscape of real life, the simple black-and-white nature of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur openly invites questions.

It's hard to take the notion of linear justice seriously; how can we honestly engage with the central premise of the High Holy Days?

The question is too good; it has stood the test of time.

But perhaps part of the answer is rooted in a perspective shift, moving from an objective view to a more personal angle, our subjective spiritual experience. Belief in reward and punishment is one of Judaism's basic core tenets; it is compatible with the fact that the universe is more complex than we can wrap our minds around, as the Creator once taught Moshe. But while the mechanics lie beyond our reach, the archetypes of atonement, justice, reward, and punishment are accessible and useful tools for moral and spiritual growth.

The question of linear justice is based on cause and effect, but the unspoken part of the equation is intimately related to time; someone did a bad thing last year and didn't repent, and they'll get to next year just fine! Even if they get struck by lightning in twenty years, that's not the notion suggested by our prayers. This invites us to examine not just how we understand justice but also how we understand time.

In our basic primary experience, we perceive time as a line — from then to now, birth to death. Linear time is deeply ingrained in our cultural, philosophical, and scientific narratives: beginning, middle, and end. It offers predictability and order.



But this sense of order is a convenient fiction, a heuristic that makes a complex universe more digestible. A linear universe could never capture the multi-layered, infinitely nuanced essence of the Divine. It would lack the depth and subtlety that make our moral dilemmas fertile ground for growth and transformation. The linearity we attribute to time and justice is subjective and limited, and there are other ways to perceive time.

Rather than perceive time as a simple line, we also understand time as something cyclical, where events repeat in patterns, with seasons and cycles. When we celebrate a birthday or anniversary, there is a sense of renewal, a revived manifestation of the original event. You were born one day some time ago, but the energy or force that gave life to you is special, and we mark it every year in the present, even though the day you were born is still anchored in the past – a temporal loop. Every birthday is a new start, a fresh count of your life, which aligns with the notion that time is not strictly linear but contains pockets of cyclical or even spiral-shaped significance.

The very building blocks of life as we know it, DNA, isn't linear – it's a double helix, an interlocking spiral.

Life is about cycles, not lines, a spiral galaxy forever rotating yet never returning to the exact same point. When we think of justice and judgment as cyclical—like the seasons of the year or the phases of the moon—we can make room for regeneration, renewal, and the sanctity of imperfection.

Rosh Hashana isn't just a commemoration of the anniversary of Creation; it reinvokes the Creative energy and forces that gave rise to life and all things, renewing our existence and endowing the New Year with freshness and vitality.

The notion of Teshuva aligns with cyclicity. We shouldn't idealize the notion of a clean slate wiped to zero. Repentance isn't a simple linear departure from the past and saying sorry; you will still be you. Repentance is a form of spiritual regeneration, what one thinker called the eternal return. It is a step forward but also a step inward; the most updated version of you would not make those same mistakes.

As we beat our chests as an act of contrition, we remember that our world is not just one of brokenness but also one of continual creation, where each end marks a new beginning, every fall is an invitation to rise, and every step of repentance is a step in our never-ending journey toward realizing human and Divine love in the ongoing struggle toward becoming better versions of ourselves, year after year, cycle after cycle.

The universe isn't governed by linear justice, but neither are Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur moments in linear time. They are recurring points on the spiral of the universe, offering us opportunities for self-examination and growth. Each turn of the spiral provides a new perspective on the same recurring challenges and themes of our journey through it, each year inviting a new opportunity for a deeper and more nuanced understanding, expanding the High Holy Days from



TorahRedux

specific moments in linear time into recurring opportunities for growth and reflection in cyclical time and profound moments of human and cosmic regeneration.

In this view, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a breath of life welcoming the new year to come, our souls invited to dance to the rhythm of an ancient melody that is still brand new.

Life and death, health or sickness, laughter or tears. These become not final verdicts but periodic reference points in the cyclical adventure of a life lived amidst the rich tapestry of wild complexity. Life isn't linear, but you probably know which way your words and deeds are oriented.

Take the opportunity the High Holy Days present to reflect, then redirect with purpose and intention, and step into the next iteration of the cycle with freshness and optimism.

It's going to be a Happy New Year.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.