

Dear Community,

One of the great rabbinical challenges consists of composing the High Holiday Sermons. On one hand, what should be the structure? Should they contain stories, jokes, to entertain and inspire? Should they be filled with textual sources to educate? Should they address the contemporary political scene? Allowing the rabbi to engage in a thrilling game of Russian Roulette with his professional future. Should they be somber? Hopeful? Some indeterminate mixture? This set of speeches is the cause for much rabbinical deliberation and antacid consumption during this period of the year.

However, the largest challenge, both for a rabbi, and really for each of us individually, is how do we shake off the apathy and lethargy that atrophy any feeling of seriousness for this Day of Judgement. This phenomenon is explored extensively in the works of our sages. Some point to the fact that we since many of us seem to do ok year after year, we have the turkey's confidence of a long life on the day before Thanksgiving. I would be surprised if James Bond still owns life insurance. While we can all relate with this phenomenon on an emotional level, intellectually we know this type of confidence to be ridiculous. In addition, many of us have suffered severe tragedies in our past, and we are told that the decision was made on a day just like this one.

The other, more mystical, explanation given is that as we sin and distance ourselves from G-d, we callous our soul and our senses. These callouses make it difficult feel anything spiritual, those ideas and realities that we believe on an intellectual level, our hearts just can't feel them. This is called 'Timum Ha'lev' a blockage of the heart. It is due to this obstacle that we pray throughout the High Holidays for G-d to remove "ערלת לבבנו" the blockages in our heart, we pray to G-d to help us to feel again.

What is the solution to these catalysts of self-destructive numbness? Reb Yisroel Salanter advocated a form of meditation, focusing on our flaws and on what lies in the balance. Others advocate increased Torah study and prayer, these actions having the power to cleanse and fix our souls. Whatever the course we choose, the first step for us is to recognize the fact that we are sleeping our way into a life and death scenario.

This Motzei Shabbat (Saturday night) we will begin to recite Shiehot (penitential prayers). The reason we start at night is to send the message to G-d, but more importantly to ourselves, of our desperation to repent and improve. Let us avoid the threat resolution of the ostrich and pray together as a community, to ask for ourselves, our families, our friends and the Jewish people a blessed new year. I am looking forward to standing with you, praying with you, growing with you.

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Agishtein