

# Elul 5777

## The Fifteen Steps of Ascent

*Elul* is a month of reflection and introspection in preparation for the High Holy Days. We examine every aspect of our lives, looking deeply into corners neglected and perhaps avoided. This month builds up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, on the afternoon of which the priests would climb 15 steps to the Temple to enter the Holy of Holies.

These 15 steps provide for us a journey of preparation to enter the Holy Days. Our new *mahzor* (holiday prayer book) contains a section of the afternoon service that meditates on each of these 15 steps. You can find this section in the Yom Kippur volume, beginning on page 450. Because the amazing wealth of options in the new book, we will not be using this section during our afternoon services. Therefore, we will use them during Elul to help us prepare.

## **How to use this Packet:**

The purpose of this packet is to stir insight and provide a forum for self-examination. The following guidelines are suggestions, but the overall goal is most important to keep in mind: that this packet prepares you for the challenge and opportunity of the Days of Awe. The daily reflection questions in this packet are intended for introspection and reaction. To assist in this effort, this year the NVHC clergy will offer reflections on our website ([www.nvhcreston.org](http://www.nvhcreston.org)) and during Torah Talk. We challenge you to find ways daily for introspection and reflection. A daily practice during the month of Elul will help you to consider your life at this moment and where you want to be in the future. If you feel so moved, contribute your thoughts in the comments section of our posts on the blog.

Each step of the 15 is intended to be studied for two days. On the first day read the text and jot down initial reactions and questions. These can take your mind wherever you want it to go, but try to remain connected to the text in some way. On the second day, try to respond in writing to the guiding questions provided. These are intended to focus your mind inward and react to the ways that this text speaks to your life individually. Write down your answers. Writing, like painting, dance and other art forms is a way to express inner beliefs, feelings and thoughts. The act of writing will bring subconscious and forgotten elements into your conscious mind. Use the artistic process to go deeper into the meaning of the text and its application to your life.

## **Step I: Holiness of God**

Pages 453-456

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** The concept of God stretches the imagination. How can we conceive of a being that spans all time and space, beyond even what we can sense? This challenge is captured in the song on page 455 by Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. Read the translation of Adon Olam on page 456. We sing this all the time, but we rarely stop to consider the meaning of the words. Notice how between verses 3 and 4, the subject subtly shifts. In the first three verses, the text describes God's infinity and greatness. But in the last two, the author describes a serenity and security that comes from putting our soul and body in God's care. Do you find the infinite and powerful notion of God to be comforting? Does God's mind-challenging existence help us feel more secure?

## **Step II: Holiness of Creation**

Pages 457-459

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** We were amazingly fortunate to bear witness to a solar eclipse just days ago. The excitement and wonder that experience generated, no matter where you were, was palpable across our land. Consider the interlacing of science and faith, as we read on page 457: “We marvel at the abiding miracle of our existence....through contemplating the mystery of creation, may we ascend toward the holy.” How do you find the connections between the experience of awe in the world, in nature and how you experience God in your life? How can those connections support your preparation for the High Holy Days?

## **Step III: Holy Time**

Pages 460-462

Initial Reaction:

### **Question:**

This step is filled with readings challenging our cultural perception of time as something to be tamed, rather than a source of awe and inspiration. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about the radical amazement that anything exists at all, and from that position every instant is a miracle. The meditation on page 461 builds upon that attitude by contrasting the modern and ancient conceptions of time. (It speaks specifically about Shabbat, but our tradition calls Yom Kippur the Sabbath of Sabbaths, so these words easily apply.) It then challenges us to reawaken ourselves to “the urgent beauty of being present.” So ask yourself, what is keeping us absent? What prevents our presence and thus our ability to sense God’s presence?

## **Step IV: Holy Space**

Pages 463-466

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** The new series of Reform *siddurim* (prayerbooks) are all titled ‘*Mishkan....*’— a holy dwelling place, a sacred container. *Mishkan Tefila* is our Shabbat prayer book; ‘the sacred dwelling place for prayer.’ These High Holy Day books are called *Mishkan HaNefesh*: ‘the sacred dwelling place for the soul. Our souls are the essence of who we are, the spark that is divine and eternal. In this month of preparation, we are doing the work of ‘*Cheshbon HaNefesh*’, an accounting of our soul. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that while time is made holy by God, space is made holy by us humans. What are you doing this month to create holiness in the spaces you occupy? What gets in your way? How does creating sacred space help you in your work of *cheshbon hanefesh*?

## **Step V: Holy Day: Yom Kippur**

Pages 468-469

Initial Reaction:

### **Question:**

The day of Yom Kippur means different things to different people. The Talmud refers to it simply as *Yoma*, “The Day.” The experience of prayer, fasting, and community on this day can be transformative for the coming year. The reading on 469 captures the Jewish symbols that went into creating a successful Yom Kippur in the ancient world: the role of the High Priest, the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the day on the calendar and the utterance of the Name of God. Meditate for a minute on your most meaningful Yom Kippur memories and ask what symbolic actions contributed to that day’s success.

We try to fill the day with symbols in our services at NVHC, wearing robes, singing magnificent choral music, bringing the entire community together. But what symbolic actions can you take at home, work or school to fill this day with meaning? Can you light a candle, change the table cloth, buy a fresh journal and pen for reflection, play meditative music? The symbolic can elevate our thoughts and challenge us to grow, deepening the experience of this day.

## **Step VI: The Holy Act of Confession**

Pages 470-472

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** In ancient times, the *kohanim* – the priests in the Temple – would speak the words of confession. First for themselves, then for their families, and then for the community of Israel. Today, for us, that may seem somewhat anathema, for how could someone else know what is in our hearts and stand before God on our behalf? Today, the language in our liturgy of our confession is communal, in the first person plural, not because one person can confess on behalf of another, but rather because we do not exclude ourselves from any possibilities of wrongs we might have unwittingly committed. Does it feel holy to stand together, shoulder to shoulder as we bare the burdens of our wrongdoings, together, seeking forgiveness? How does the exhortation in the words of Psalm 130, on page 470 encourage you to embrace the act of confession as a means to greater holiness in your life? What does that look like for you?

## **Step VII: The Holy Act of Sacrificial Offering**

Pages 473-476

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** The centerpiece of Yom Kippur in the ancient world was the service in the Temple and the offering of sacrifices. Today we see those offerings as demonstrations of generosity from the people to the community. Yom Kippur is a time to renew our commitment to offering. The most obvious way is the giving of tzedakah to the synagogue or other causes. But think more broadly for a minute. How do you show generosity in your life? Think through the concentric and overlapping communities in which you have relationships and obligations. How do you show generosity to the people and institutions that sustain you?

## **Step VIII: Holiness of Jewish Memory**

Pages 478-482

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** Remembrance is what makes life eternal, connecting people, one generation to the next. Think about your most potent Jewish memory. To whom are you connected? What did you learn from that person? How has that experience and those people shaped who you are, who you strive to be? On page 480, Amos and Fannie Oz write that the experiential social history of the Jews is, 'the single most important fact about the survival of the Jews.' It is not just about a present moment of connection, but about words and remembrances and ideas shared during those moments that build a sacred life network. For some, it began in infancy; for others, later in life. For many, it is a lifetime's work, in progress. How does sacred memory of lived Jewish experience serve you at this time of year, getting your soul ready for its journey of repentance, forgiveness and celebration?

## **Step IX: Building a world of holy places**

Pages 483-485

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** This section focuses us on the physical spaces around us. We often find grandeur in the bigness of a mountain or a cathedral, or the beauty of ornate stained glass or a field of flowers. But the last paragraph of the reading on page 484 and the whole reading on page 485 reminds us to find spiritual power in simple things and acts of devotion. Our home and our tables can be temples and altars if they become places where we “gather to offer our best and share what we have.” So think about how you have used your home as a platform for your best. What can you do to fill your home with sharing what you have? What about the other spaces you inhabit, like a garden, a school, office, hospital or the synagogue? What can you do to make those spaces into true temples that bring out the best in yourself and other people?

## **Step X: Finding Holiness through Torah Study**

Pages 486-488

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** The word '*torah*' comes from the Hebrew word meaning to guide or to teach. While 'The Torah' is The Five Books of Moses, Judaism teaches about '*torah*' study as all manners of Jewish learning to offer guidance and inspiration in our lives. Doing *cheshbon hanefesh*, the accounting of our soul, necessitates an openness to learning – learning about ourselves, about how we may have wronged others, about new ideas that might help us to grow in our humanity. The poem on page 488 shares with us a beautiful image of Torah as water – providing nourishment and sustenance, giving life. The poem describes words of Torah refreshing the soul? Does that image work for you? What would refreshment of the soul look and feel like? How does Torah and Jewish learning help you to 'wash away sin and make atonement'?

## **Step XI: Finding Holiness through Prayer**

Pages 489-491

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** This phrase on page 491, “Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods,” is classic Heschel and an enormous challenge to our worship. We so often can see prayers as the comforting and familiar stuff we do at services. But Heschel demands that prayer rebels against the insensitivity and intolerance in the status quo. Are you willing to go there? Are you willing to let prayer challenge you and rip out any callouses that have built up in your soul? Most of us probably are not ever ready for that, but as we get closer to Rosh Hashanah, consider that we all need that kind of subversive experience. Allow yourself to be overthrown.

## **Step XII: Finding Holiness in Nature**

Pages 493-496

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** Often, the beauty, the strong emotions, and the exhilarating excitement of the natural world can open the door to something profound and moving. The majesty of the earth itself can be meaningful for its own sake. This set of pages seeks to reveal and underscore the importance of awe in prayer, to access the sacred in the world around us. How do you find spiritual fulfillment in nature? Is Judaism and Jewish practice different from meditating on a mountaintop? Where are the similarities? Perhaps you might seek out a place of natural beauty or grandeur in these preparatory days and consider for yourself the relationships between solitude and nature in prayer, and how that might give you space and direction in your *cheshbon hanefesh* – to see your journey right now in a slightly different context, finding holiness in the world around you.

## **Step XIII: The Holiness of Children, the Holiness of Hope**

Pages 497-500

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** All of religion, and Judaism, and Yom Kippur at their essence are about elevating our humanity. The poem on pages 498-99 uses the imagery of the home and the sanctity of the parent-child relationship to grab ahold of the most tender and vulnerable parts of our being. This is also why the reading on Rosh Hashanah is often the binding of Isaac. Because that too is a story about a parent's love for his child (in a complicated and troubling way). These relationships can be our most rewarding and our most challenging. Our parents and our children know how to push our buttons (because they installed them!) and we have to do what the poem says anyhow: "Instill in me Your love so that I can stand at the entrance of my home and distribute it as simply as one slices bread and spreads the butter each morning . . ." Have you given your best to your children and your parents? What have you learned about yourself from those relationships this year and what do you hope to invest in them in the year to come?

## **Step XIV: The Holiness of Joy**

Pages 501-503

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** In Judaism, the notion of joy is much deeper than a particular emotional state. We often seek happiness through a variety of external means – things we acquire, people who surround us, places that we live, tasks that we do. In our thinking, suffering seems incongruous with joy. Our tradition places tremendous value on the manner in which we live our lives. Cultivating Joy – a deep connection to God’s presence in our lives – is seen as a balm for our suffering. On p. 501, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes, “A life of service [to God] that is rooted in joy....endures in spite of external events and circumstances.” Do you find that to be true for you? Could you imagine ways to cultivate joy, leading to gratitude, even in the face of challenge, that would bring about spiritual and moral growth that you are seeking at this time? How might the words of the Psalmist be helpful (Psalm 126): “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy”? How might you describe for yourself the path from joy to experiencing the sacred in life, to the work of *teshuvah* (repentance)?

## **Step XV: Seeing Ourselves as Vessels of Holiness**

Pages 504-507

Initial Reaction:

**Question:** Hillel boiled all of Judaism down to “What is hateful to you, do not do to another.” We are each sovereign, autonomous and mostly privileged and free beings. Yet our communities and relationships are the main source of meaning in our lives. So how do we fill our actions and our purpose with holiness. That means we need to see each day as an opportunity for something holy, something different in how we behave. This takes courage and fortitude. Are you ready to accept that opportunity and challenge? Can you accept the burden of “In the places where no one acts like a human being, let us bring courage; let us bring compassion; let us bring humanity” (page 506)? That is the challenge of these days. *L’shana Tova*. May you be inscribed and sealed for blessing in the Book of Life.