

Seder Rosh HaShanah by Noam Zion

From Educator's Guide to *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home*
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For orders and questions - zionsacs@netvision.net.il
or <http://www.haggadahsrus.com/>

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She-hechyanu

Birkat Yeladim

Netillat Yadaim and *HaMotzi*

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¹ Due to the differences in Hebrew software we will not be able to include the Hebrew blessings necessary for holiday celebrations at the table in this electronic collections of essays.

B. *Seder Rosh HaShanah: Symbolic Foods and New Year's Wishes*

Introduction: Honey, Hallah, Fruits and Vegetables, with Well-Wishing

Rosh HaShanah's evening meal² may encompass an ancient custom of eating symbolic foods, a mini-Seder, if you will. The family tastes (or at least holds up for a New Year's wish) a variety of foods whose name, shape or color remind us of our greatest hopes for the New Year. This custom corresponds to the beginning of the year - a time of hope mixed with apprehension. The High Holidays - Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*) - are days of judgment - "who will live and will die? who will get rich and who will fall into poverty?" Yet they are also "good days" (*Yontof - Yom Tov*) for sumptuous celebration around the table, when we purchase for the whole family new dress clothes to wear on Rosh HaShanah.

Since the days of the Talmud the foods on the holiday table have been transformed into informal symbols of our New Year wishes. Best-known are the apples dipped in honey that symbolize a sweet year. (The Hafetz Haim, a great legal scholar of the 20th century, reminds us that the sweetness should be reflected in our mood as well as our food. Avoid anger for it is a poor omen for the coming year, be sweet of temperament on Rosh HaShanah). Besides apples and honey, even the most ordinary vegetables, seasonal fruits and miscellaneous foods provide us an occasion to wish away our fears and verbalize our deepest hopes as well as a chance to pun on their names in any number of local tongues.

Hallah is usually dipped in honey. The shape of the Hallah is often round shaped like a rising circular staircase (to recall how people ascend or descend the ladder of Divinely determined destiny). The circular breads also represent the circularity of time. There are other holiday motifs such as surrounding the Hallah with a wreath of flowers or other decorations to recall the crowning of the Divine King on Rosh HaShanah. After reciting the blessing over bread - *HaMotzi*, everyone wishes one another:

² Some families buy a special fruit or vegetable just now in season, one that has not been eaten for at least a year and bless it on the second night of Rosh haShana. This custom too may be combined with the Seder Rosh HaShana but it also has significance for Jewish law. For it is not clear on what basis we recite *She-chiyanu* – the blessing reserved for a new food or object or a beginning of a new holiday - even on the *second* night of Rosh HaShana. By adding a new fruit one has an uncontested reason for reciting *She-chiyanu* even on the second night.

Y'hi ratzon milfaneacha she-t'cha-deish aleinu Shana Tova um'tuka!
May it be God's will that a good and sweet year be renewed for us.

The dipping of bread at each meal often continues from Rosh HaShanah all the way to the end of Sukkot. Jewish women from Poland and southern Russia used to place some honey in the four corners of their homes for luck. (Candy might serve the same role today).

The Rosh HaShanah Seder Menu and the Tunisian "Honey Page"

The Rosh Hashanah Seder finds its earliest written source in a peculiar menu whose symbolic significance is not revealed:

For a good omen on Rosh HaShanah one should make it a habit to eat squash [like pumpkin], legumes [like string beans], *kartei* (leeks), spinach and dates." (Talmud TB Keritot 6a)

Tunisian Jews often "publish" a French and Arabic menu called the "**Honey Page**" for it lists all the special foods to be eaten and to be used to symbolize New Year's wishes and of course it is headed by the word "*Devash* - honey." Then the list often continues with figs, dates, pomegranates, apples, and the head of a ram or a fish. Jews from other lands add carrots and beets, but obviously any food will do as long as you have a creatively corny sense of humor and a willingness to share your greatest fears and hopes.

Traditionally the **head** of a lamb or a carp is the occasion for a blessing (though vegetarians might perhaps substitute a head of cabbage or a head of lettuce):

Y'hi ratzon sheh- ni-hi-yeh l'Rosh v'lo l'zanav

May it be God's will that we will be a head and not a tail.

Spinach or beets, called in Hebrew *seleck* which can also mean "to remove decisively," elicit the New Year's wish:

Y'hi ratzon sheh- yis-talku soneinu.

May it be God's will that our enemies be removed from our presence.

Pomegranates, filled with numerous sweet seeds, traditionally are associated with the 613 mitzvot so the blessing is:

Y'hi ratzon sheh-ni-hi-yeh malei mitzvot ka-rimon

May it be God's will that our lives may be as full of mitzvot

as the pomegranate is with seeds.

Carrots or Squash which are called respectively, *Gezer* (decree) or *Kara* (tear up or read) are used for:

Yehi ratzon milfanecha she-yikara roa gezar dinneinu, v'yikaru Ifanecha zakiyoteinu
May it be God's will that the evil decrees against us be torn up and our good merits be read out before You. .

For dipping **Hallah** we might use this hassidic wish:

"May God create yeast in your soul, causing you to ferment, and mature, to rise, elevate, to your highest possibilities, to reach your highest self"

The Power of the Pun: Inventing Your own Seder Rosh HaShanah

Let us suggest some contemporary "green grocer" wishes punning in English on the shape, name or color of these fruits and vegetables:

Dates -

May it be God's will that all my single friends have many dates this year.

Tomatoes or Hot Peppers -

May it be God's will that this be a red-hot New Year.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg suggested:

Peaches - May we have a "peachy" year!

Brussels Sprouts- May our good fortune "sprout"!

(Irving Greenberg, High Holiday Guide (Clal,1977). Others bring leaf of **lettuce, raisins and celery**.

Let's pray that our employers will raise our salary.

Sing *Al Hadvash v'al HaOketyz* by Naomi Shemer

This is popular Israeli folksong uses the Rosh HaShanah symbol of honey to express the bittersweet nature of life. It was originally written to comfort a friend who lost her husband in the war.

Getting Started: Making Your Own Seder Rosh HaShanah³

1. This is a festive holiday, both for the individual, the household and the extended family. The table is set with the best dishes and each member of the household is given gifts - traditionally, their new winter wardrobe and something sweet like wine for adults or dessert treats for children.
2. Wine and hallah (usually round hallot) follow the same format as Shabbat, though the words of the Kiddush are different. Many families also dip both apples and hallah into honey and wish each other a sweet year.
3. The honey dipping custom has much charm and offers much leeway for creative expansion into what is traditionally called the Rosh HaShana "Seder." Without in any way trying to overburden the Rosh HaShanah meal with a long seder like Pesach, we suggest you add a five minute ceremony. Immediately after Kiddush over the wine and *Hamotzi* over the bread dipped in honey, try serving not only apples with honey but also a "**seder plate**" with whatever fruits and vegetables come to mind - the more surprising the better. Traditional good wishes may be recited or contemporary, extemporaneous ones (see traditional and innovative ones below).
4. Guests may be invited in advance to bring a unique vegetable or fruit and to invent a punning blessing for the New Year using its name or texture.
5. Begin perhaps by asking each participant at the table to share their greatest fears and hopes for the coming year. Then model for the guests some traditional blessings over a head of cabbage or beets or pomegranate or (see above) and then invite them to compose their own informal blessings based on color, shape, name etc of each of these edible symbols of our hopes for the New Year.

Parent-Child Corner

1. HOLIDAY COOKING. Children have much to enjoy and to learn from Rosh HaShana. In addition to partaking in the cooking of matzah ball soup

³ Based on Ephraim Davidson, p. 170, in Menachem and Devorah HaCohen, *Hagim uMoadim: Rosh HaShana*, Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem, 1978.

or the baking of honey cake, they should choose their own special treat as well as pick new winter clothes for the holidays.

THE WORLD'S BIRTHDAY CAKE. For dessert consider making a **birthday cake** for the world since Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the Creation. Sing "Happy Birthday" (*Yom Huledet Sameach*) and ask everyone to share their best wishes for the earth and its inhabitants.

2. **TABLE SETTING.** The *Rosh HaShana Seder* offers them room to choose their own vegetables or fruits as symbols, to generate their own list of good wishes and to arrange the table festively with placemats. However it is also an occasion to say goodbye to last year. Reviewing the good and the bad and to envision the hopes and fears from the coming year.

3. **ROSH HASHANAH CARDS.** Preparing handwritten and illustrated **New Year's Cards** can be used in service of the Rosh HaShana table. Invite the children to collect and arrange the cards they have received in a display as well as to write and decorate name cards for each guest that take the form of the Shanah Tova card.

4. **TASHLICH and SELF-REFLECTION:** More serious topics like self-reflection may be approached through the stories and quotes below as well as ritually by doing *Tashlich* in which on Rosh HaShanah afternoon (the first day unless it falls on Shabbat), we symbolically empty our pockets of our sins and bad habits and throw them into the sea. Traditionally the ceremony is held near a body of water (ideally, fresh water with fish to swallow the sins, as if they were breadcrumbs). When far from a body of water, people often make-do. From my porch in Jerusalem, for example, we can see the Dead Sea and we do Tashlich right after lunch. One might even adapt this custom to the table over a bowl of water. With our first child at age 3 we wrote out her bad habits and threw them into the toilet which she flushed. Obviously the custom is designed to arouse inner reflection, not mechanically to remove sins. While Jews of different lands use different verses to accompany the act of emptying their pockets of wrongdoing,

5. **STORYTELLING.** Stories to read the children include children's versions of the **Abraham and Sarah stories** which are read in the Torah readings on Rosh HaShana.

C. Annual Tzedakah Allocations in a Family Meeting at the Table

While sitting at home as a family we can take advantage of the occasion to do a mitzvah collectively that is most appropriate for this season.

The beginning of the Jewish year (so different from the celebration of civil new year on January 1 in Times Square) is a time traditionally set aside not only for *Tefillah* (prayer and introspection) and *Teshuvah* (personal growth and change) but also for *Tzedakah* (giving what we owe to the needy). Thus a concrete way to begin the Ten Days of Teshuvah from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur is to convene a family meeting of the Tzedakah allocations committee around the holiday table. Discussing money on Shabbat or Yom Tov is fully permissible as long as the money is not for personal profit but for communal needs.

Ask family members for a list of potential Tzedakah recipients and for a pledge. Then vote on the distribution of the funds after each one makes their argument for their preferred priorities. You may wish to establish three categories and give an equal amount to each form of repairing and improving the world (*Tikkun Olam*), for example:

- a. political and social reform activity
- b. basic human needs for needy of all backgrounds
- c. promoting Jewish culture and education (for without education the next generation will not continue the Jewish values on which social action, Tzedakah, are based)

In our family we often read the list of organizations supported by the ZIV Tzedakah foundation since they support innovative small individual initiatives - Jewish and non-Jewish, in Israel and in the USA - which are truly inspirational. Others make a contribution to MAZON, a Jewish organization helping support the starving world-wide. While eating so well at our own holiday table we must remember and act to help the hungry worldwide.

Schnapps and Popsicle Sticks in the Old Shul

An investment banker remembers his father's immigrant shul in New York where he learned the obligation and the pleasures of giving money to the needy. The week before Rosh HaShanah the members would come to pay

their dues, settle their debts and buy tickets for the High Holidays. Often a bottle of schnapps was provided and on a side table there was a wide array of old fashioned thin, scalloped paper plates. To each one was appended a popsicle stick with the name of a fund for the needy written on it in handwriting. Our young banker would receive a small fist full of dollar bills from his father, who was busy shmoozing and sipping schnapps. The child was charged with deciding to whom to allocate his family's Tzedakah.

D. Readings to Set the Tone for Rosh HaShanah: A Time of Critical Self-Reflection

Rabbi Marshall Meyer (activist for human rights in Argentina under the repressive antisemitic government of the 1970's)⁴

"Rosh HaShanah initiates the *Aseret Yimei Teshuvah* commonly translated as the 'Ten Days of Repentance.' I would like to suggest that for these days to have a new dimension of meaning we translate them as the 'Ten Days of Searching, Twisting and Turning,' of wrestling with our souls and trying desperately to find new meaning to our existence."

Hannah Senesh's Diary- October 11, 1940

(young Hungarian kibbutznik who volunteered as a Jewish paratrooper and spy for the British Army and the Hagana, who dropped behind Nazi lines in Hungary, and who was executed in Budapest, 1945)

"I want to make an accounting to myself, to God, that is I want to measure my life and my actions against the highest and purest ideal before which I can stand, to compare what I should have become with with what I have become..."

A Kibbutz Educator's Bar Mitzvah Speech to his Grandson

"When my grandson reached Bar Mitzvah age he asked me: "What kind of holiday is Rosh HasShanah?"

I replied: "I will give you for this incoming year a diary with 365 pages and every morning you will try to write down all your hopes for that day and then before you go to sleep each night you will examine honestly and summarize how much of your expectations [of yourself] you realized. Know that whatever you wrote down in that book was the sum of your very own choices and decisions, the work of your own hands and the fingerprints you left on the world. No God and no superior force intervened to enforce its will on you [As Maimonides says, God gives us absolute free will in the realm of moral responsibility and only a fool believes that one's fate is sealed by luck or by the horoscope]. Your balance, your final accounting, is on the 365th page of your diary. That is Rosh HaShanah."

(Arye Ben-Gurion, *Yalkut - Yamim Noraim*, Kibbutz Movement)

⁴ ABC Radio Interview September 28, 1986

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (19th century Poland) once made the oddest ruling:

When Rosh HaShanah coincided with Shabbat, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak issued God a decree: "Sovereign of the Universe! Today is the New Year when you write the Jews either into the Book of Life or the Book of Death. However today is also Shabbat. So it is forbidden on Shabbat to write their verdict in the Book of Death. However you may inscribe them in the Book of Life since when life is endangered one may save it even while committing a violation of Shabbat. That is my ruling as the local rabbi of this community and you must abide by it."

Reb Yisrael Salanter and the Shoemaker (19th century, head of Eastern European Mussar movement for increased ethical sensitivity among religious Jews)

Everyone was ready for the High Holy days and Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was on his way to the synagogue when he heard hammer blows. The sound came from a still-lit attic workshop where the town cobbler still toiled.

Reb Yisrael stole up to that attic and watched the shoemaker bent over his unfinished work. These were the townspeople's shoes which they would need for the incoming winter.

"What are you doing here still working at this late hour before the holiday?"

The shoemaker raised his head and replied:

"As long as the candle is still burning there is still time to fix things [*Tikkun*]."

So Reb Yisrael went out into the streets of the town and cried out:

"Jews! As long as the candle [of your souls] still burns there is still time to fix the world [*Tikkun Olam*]."

E. Rosh HaShanah Table Talk: Our Personal Year-at-a-Glance

An icebreaker to introduce guests can also serve to introduce one theme for serious reflection. Ask the people at the table to think for a minute about one of these questions and share a first response.

- Today is the birthday of the world. What aspect of the Creation most impresses you? Or what has "past" in your life and what do you hope will be "born" or "reborn"?
- Today is *Yom HaDin* - judgment day for evaluating the last year. What was one of your achievements/ disappointments for this year?
- Or what event in other people's lives brought you the greatest joy/ heartache?
- Name one mitzvah you are proud of having participated in. Or name one New Year's resolution or commitment which you would like to make for the coming year?
- Today is the beginning of new possibilities. What impossible dream would you pursue, if you had enough money to take off for a year from your present occupation?

Rosh HaShanah Table Talk: Happy Birthday to the World

Rosh HaShanah is the Birthday of the Earth that God created in seven days. So too it is a time for human rebirth and renewal. Some people might wish to prepare a birthday cake for Creation and sing Happy Birthday and make birthday wishes.

The American poet e.e.cummings composed a poem appropriate for the occasion:

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth day of life and of love
and wings and

of the gay great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any - lifted from the no
of all nothing - human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

The following midrash reminds us of our ecological responsibility for the gift of nature:

When the Holy One created Adam then God took him on a tour around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. Then God said:
"See all my works, how beautiful and good they are! All that I have created, I created for you. Beware that you do not corrupt or destroy my universe, for if you ruin it, there is no one to repair it after you."
(Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

According to another midrash, today is more precisely the **Birthday of Humanity**, for the world was begun on the 25th of Elul and man and woman were created six days later on the 1st of Tishrei, the Hebrew date of Rosh HaShanah. That first day was packed with personal peaks and valleys.

The human being was created and in a period of twelve hours went through an entire spiritual journey: Created in the first hour of the sixth day, the human sinned in the 10th hour of the same day, was judged in the 11th hour, and pardoned in the 12th. God then assured humans that in the future when their descendants stand in judgement before the Holy One on Rosh HaShanah, they, like the first humans, will receive a full pardon." (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 29:1)

If Rosh HaShanah is a birthday then at the table you might ask people: what birthday gift would you give the earth or give humanity on this day?

Rosh HaShanah Table Talk: Trying a New Path

Halacha or Jewish law means literally the "a way of walking" and Rosh HaShanah is about checking your bearings and taking new paths where necessary.

The Hassidic **Rebbe Haim of Tzanz** told this parable:

A person had been wandering about in the forest for several days, unable to find a way out. Finally in the distance he saw another person approaching him and his heart filled with joy. He thought to himself: "Now surely I shall find a way out of the forest." When they neared each other, he asked the other person, "Brother, will you please tell me the way out of the forest?"

The other replied: "Brother, I also do not know the way out, for I too have been wandering about here for many days. But this much I can tell you. Do not go the way I have gone, for I know that is not the way. Now come, let us search for the way out together."

(adapted from S.Y. Agnon, *The Days of Awe*)

Read this story and discuss your hopes for new direction in life. Think about a new path you would like to explore this coming year or let others know about an old path you have tried which they might best avoid.

In his diaries **Franz Kafka**, the 20 th century Czech Jewish writer, reflects on the difficulty of finding our way and yet our eternal hope . If we knew we were on the right road, having to leave it would mean endless despair. But we are on a road that only leads to a second one and then to a third one and so forth. And the real highway will not be sighted for a long, long time, perhaps never. So we drift in doubt. But also in an unbelievable, beautiful diversity. Thus the accomplishment of hopes remains an always unexpected miracle. But in compensation, the miracle remains forever possible.

The poet and Bible scholar **Joel Rosenberg** speaks of Rosh HaShanah as homecoming rather than as journeying:

The Hebrew word for year - *Shana* - means change. But its sense is two-fold: on the one hand, change of cycle, repetition (Hebrew, *l'shanot* reiterate, from *sh'naim*, two), but on the other hand, it means difference (as in the [the Pesach Seder when we ask] *mah nishtana?* How is this night different?) We are the same, we are different. We

repeat, we learn, we recapitulate. We encounter something new. *Shana Tova!* means "Have a good change!"

And yet, how familiar is this time! The chant, the faces, the dressed-up mood, the Hebrew letter, the calling on the same God, the words, the blessings, the bread, the apples, the honey, the wine - all are the same, and yet completely new. We meet ourselves again and for the first time.

A year that begins anew is also the fruit of the year that preceded. Good or bad, it has made us wiser. It will not constrain us. We choose from it what we want and need like gifts we brought from journeys. Rosh HaShanah is always like *coming home* - just as Pesach was always *going on a journey*.⁵

How do we find our Divine Parent who is in Heaven?

How do we find our Parent who is in Heaven?

By good deeds and the study of Torah.

How does the Blessed Holy One find us - through love, through brotherhood, through respect, through companionship, through truth, through peace, through bending the knee, through humility, through more study, through less commerce, through the personal service to our teachers, through discussion among the students, through a good heart, through decency, through No that is really No, and through Yes that is really Yes.

(Midrash Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 23 - double check original hebrew against translation???)

The Place Where we are Absolutely Right by Yehuda Amichai

The greeting for Yom Kippur is usually Gemar Hatimah Tova - "May your good verdict, your being written into the Book of Life be finalized, completed and sealed officially." The imagery is of a court decision rendered tentatively on Rosh HaShannah and waiting confirmation with wax seal (Hatimah). However one might wish to replace this wish for finality, for closing our life options with a wish for "Hatkhalot Tovot - Good Beginnings."

In the same sense we might rejoice with doubts and longings that reveal our world to be less than certain, less than final. The "newness" of the New Year is nurtured from that openness. Let me quote a verse

⁵ Unknown source.

from my favorite poet whose poems I often take with me to the synagogue on Yom Kippur:

From the place where we are absolutely right, flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are absolutely right is trampled, hardened, like courtyard.

However doubts and loves make the world rise like dough.
So does a mole, so does a plow.

Recall our power of self-transformation as understood by Lewis Carroll:

Caterpillar: ".....and who are you?"

Alice: "II hardly know Sir, just at present-at least I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then."

-Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Setting High Standards: To be Moshe or To be Yourself?

Maimonides:

Do not imagine that character is determined at birth by God [or by the stars or by genetics] as the astrologers believe. We have been given free will. Any person can become as righteous as Moses or as wicked as King Jerovam [of the northern kingdom of Israel]. We ourselves shape our traits to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly. No one forces us, no one decides for us, no one drags us along one path or another. We ourselves, by our own volition, choose our way! ...Therefore we should and we can repent, examining our way of life, abandoning our negative habits and returning to God. That is the great pillar of the Torah and the mitzvot: "Look, I have given you today [to choose] between a way of life and goodness and between a way of death and evil' (Deuteronomy 30:15)." (Maimonides, Teshuvah 5:2-3, Mishne Torah)

However the Hassidic Rebbe Zushya used to say:

In the world to come when I come before the Divine Judge I will not be asked: 'Why did you not live up to the model of Moshe?' But I shall be asked: 'Why did you not live up to the model of Zushya?'

**At a Time of Teshuvah We are All in Need of Good Editor
by Chaya Gafni**

Submission

Days of
inscription
of submission
before God
bent, back curved
as a comma,
or an end quotation
" " mark
having spoken
having scrawled the letters of our lives
on *claf* and cow hide

all have bent
over Ink black Nights
to meet these dead lines

to submit
rough draft in trembling claw
of a twelve month tale
of awetobiographic awe

Lapping up a page of whiteness
With a pen's thirsty tip
Sent to press
the Book of Life
encyclopaedic
voluminous

Each name a manuscript
of events
sins scribbled like a stowaway
writing wishes from the bowels
of a bottom-born ship

all of us in need of a good editor
to make structural emendations

spelling corrections, verb replacements

for a life lived
in stream of conscious
must be crafted by master's fingers,
gripping thumb
into something well worth reading
when at last the year is done

so, pray, let us write a masterpiece
let us be published
in the world

to come.

E. *Shanah Tova* Cards - Wishing Others Well

Please Don't Say, "Happy New year, Rabbi"

Daniel Gordis, author of *A Jewish Parent's Reference Guide*, complains that as a rabbi he always winced at his congregant's well-intentioned but misguided greeting - "Happy New year." He recommends that parents explain to their children:

The Jewish phrase "*Shana Tovd*" means not a "happy" new year, but a "good" new year. Jews wish each other not just a year filled with happiness, but a year filled with goodness, in which we do good, bring good to the world, and try to become good people....Send out your own Rosh HaShana card with a greeting that reflects your sense of [a good year]. With desktop publishing and color printers these days, it is not hard. (p.222)

Rosh HaShana New Year's Cards⁶

Greetings cards became a holiday custom in nineteenth century Western Europe and Rosh HaShanah cards followed suit. However already in the 14th century Rabbi Jacob Molin known as the Maharil recommended his teacher's practice of adding the greeting *L'Shana Tova Tikateivu v'Teichateimu* to all correspondence sent during the month leading up to *Yamim Noraim* - the High Holidays. In 19th century Germany some cards took the form of a bank check written on the "Bank of Heaven" promising that "120 happy years will be granted by the Creator of the world with health, sustenance, blessing and success, wealth and honor."

In England a Jew named Raphael Tuck started in 1866 a commercial business ("Art Publishers to Their Majesties the King and Queen') to print Christmas cards. His son Adolph was made a baronet in 1910 in recognition of his production of these Christmas cards for the royal family. However he was also a loyal Jew, president of the Jewish Historical Society, and his company produced some of the first commercial Rosh HaShanah cards in the same period. During World War I, the Jewish Welfare Board sent V- Mail (Victory mail) Rosh HaShanah cards to Jewish personnel overseas. (see PICTURES). In Israel a series of holiday stamps is issued in this season and used annually for New Year's greeting cards.

⁶ Based on Philip Goodman, *Rosh HaShanah Anthology*, JPS (p 274ff)

The historic origin of the Jewish greeting - *L'Shana Tova Tikateivu v'Teichateimu* - "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year" - is the metaphor of the three books.

"Three books are opened [in heaven] on Rosh HaShanah - one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate people. [Already on Rosh HaShanah] the thoroughly righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life; the thoroughly wicked in the Book of Death but the verdict on the intermediates is suspended from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur" -so they can get busy balancing their moral accounts during the Ten Days of Repentance. (TB Rosh HaShana 16b). Therefore immediately after Rosh HaShanah it is considered bad etiquette to wish your friends "May you be inscribed for good life." Surely they have already been inscribed in the Book of Life and they only await Yom Kippur to have that verdict finalized and sealed - *Teichatemu* - hence the appropriate greeting - "May you be sealed for a good life."

The Genesis Festival - "I will not be inscribed without You!" by Mordechai Gafni ⁷

I lead the opening ceremony of what is called in Israel "The Genesis Festival." It is a wondrous gathering of some 25,000 people which takes place on Rosh HaShanah for young people who would not otherwise be in the synagogue, [so called "secular" Israelis though their search for spirituality does not match that description very well]. Several years ago we started a custom of having one hundred *shofarot* (ram's horns) blown, together with 360 drummers to bid farewell to the past as we usher in the future. In the middle of this all, I give a short talk:

"On the New Year, our tradition teaches that those who merit are inscribed in the Book of Life. At this moment, the universe is judging who will live and who will die. Here at the Genesis festival of love, we will not allow God or his angels that choice. We will not allow judgment to separate us from each other. So I ask each one of you to turn to the person next to you and say - 'I refuse to be written in the Book of Life....without you!'"

⁷ *The Mystery of Love*

Letting Go of Perfection by Mordechai Gafni⁸

Perfectionism is but another disguise for control. Self love then means giving up on your own need to be perfect. Self love is to allow room for imperfection and failure. Emerson was right when he wrote, "There is a crack in everything that God has made." [See also Leonard Cohen's song lyric "Anthem" which refers to this: "Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."]

It's like the old Japanese tea masters. When they made their utensils, they'd make sure that something, be it the tea scoop or the bowl, would have a flaw. A really nice and well-placed flaw, mind you, but still a flaw. If the thing was flawless, they would fix that. For every wisdom master knows, nothing is flawless.

The Hassidic master the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his disciples, "After you have gone, how will we know whether another spiritual master is true or false?" "If he promises to teach you pure prayer, know that he is a false master."

So, the first movement of forgiveness and love for yourself and others is to let go of the need for purity, which is really just a cover for total control.

Mystical Musings: Even God Didn't Get it Right by Mordechai Gafni

For the Kabbalist, failure is built into the very fabric of existence. Ultimately, that means that God is both the source and model of failure. One of the least understood and most radical dimensions of Kabbalistic teaching is the model of a God who cannot seem to get it right the first time around.

Remember that in Renaissance Kabbalah, the primary image of creation is God force emanating light into vessels. For whatever reason, these vessels are structurally flawed. The flawed vessels are unable to hold the light streaming into them from the divine emanation. They shatter. Shards of vessels fall and disperse throughout reality. Many of the shards retain sparks of light. The purpose of existence is to gather

⁸ *The Mystery of Love*

the sparks of light, called *nitzotzot*, and reintegrate them with their divine source.ⁱ

What is essential in this kabalistic image is the centrality of failure. God tries to create the world. It doesn't work because the vessels shatter. Our whole lives are then spent trying to return to the original pristine state before the vessels shattered, the only difference being that this time when we return, we are humbler, wiser and able to transcend even the initial perfection with which we began.

An image from Talmudic mysticism: God "who creates worlds and destroys them." God is dissatisfied with his creation. He is the artist who tears up draft after draft until one spills from his brush that seems right.

We are imitators of divinity. We participate in divinity. Just as God stood on the abyss of darkness and said, "Let there be light," so do we stand on the abyss of darkness and say, "Let there be light." Just as God failed in his creative gesture yet reached deep within to find the love to create again, so do we.

G. Tashlich

On Rosh Hashana's first afternoon⁹, there is a medieval custom to find a body of water and symbolically throw out our sins and bad habits by emptying our pockets. Often bread crumbs are dispersed over the water. Ideally the body of water has fish however in my neighborhood in Jerusalem we do tashlich overlooking the Dead Sea which has no fish. My most impressive Tashlich ceremony was in the Canadian community of Niagra Falls where the congregation gathered at the edge of these powerful falls and emptied their pockets while the Japanese tourists swooped down to capture this local custom on their cameras.

⁹ If the first day of Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbat, then Tashlich is postponed until the second day.