

In San Jose, California, there is a small museum set in a beautiful garden; the front of the building is guarded by an army of ram-headed lion sphinxes similar to those found in ancient Thebes. It is the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, and inside there is a replica of an Egyptian tomb which you enter down a dimly-lit flight of faux rock stairs, designed to create the illusion that you are climbing down into an ancient pyramid, not a museum basement.

Life after death was a paramount concern of the ancient Egyptians, and the tomb is a testament to all the measures they determined one could take to ensure a happy afterlife. The ancient Egyptians believed that whatever you depicted in your tomb would come true after your death, so every luxury imaginable was either placed in the tomb or painted on the walls.

The main room of the tomb was painted with a mural of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and depicted what the afterlife of the deceased pharaoh would look like. Each wall portrayed a different part of the afterlife, including the path one would take to cross over into eternity. On the last wall was an image of the dead pharaoh standing in front of a balance scale, with all of his good deeds piled on one side and all of his bad deeds on the other.

I was struck by that imagery. Here in the midst of an Egyptian tomb was a pictorial representation of how we Jews talk about God and judgment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur! Our liturgy tells us over and over that we are being judged and that just one mitzvah can “tip the scales toward good.” Our own liturgy invites us to conjure the image of a divine scale judging our actions of the past year. At first glance one might think that we share this idea with the ancient Egyptians.

However, there is one critical difference: the Egyptian vision of the judgment came with a guarantee. The mural depicted many gods overseeing the weighing of deeds, including two key figures: a god waiting to take the pharaoh away to an eternity of luxury, and another — the crocodile god — waiting to gobble up the soul of the

deceased if the scale should tip towards bad deeds. The Egyptians wanted to ensure the soul would join the other gods in a peaceful and satisfying afterlife. To make certain of that, at the bottom of the scale was a depiction of yet another god – this one carefully and discreetly adding weights to the side of good deeds, so no matter what the deceased had done in life, the scale would always tip toward good. It was not about what you did in life – it was about knowing the right god to help you.

I looked at the picture of a god helping this dead pharaoh cheat his way into a better afterlife and thought that this must be part of the reason why we had to get out of Egypt. This radically different view of death – and life – seems to show that the Jews needed a spiritual rescue as much as a physical one. Jews believe that what you do in life matters. Our focus is on life and how we live it in this world, rather than on what happens after we die.

We spend these Days of Awe aware of the delicate balance between good and wrongdoing. We shift our focus inward and we reflect on our lives and how we can more often make the right choices, do the right thing, and become our best selves. We know that it is our actions and our relationships that make our lives good and worthwhile. No wonder we had to get out of Egypt; fantasizing about the afterlife is no way to live.

In Hebrew, Egypt is called “Mitzrayim” – which means “a narrow place.” A narrow place is a place where you are stuck and it seems all but impossible to get out. A narrow place is where you are closed in, your vision is limited and can’t see the possibilities that are around you. The opposite of that narrow place, our destination, is Israel – which means “struggle.” Growth and change are a struggle, and on Rosh Hashanah we begin the hard work of getting unstuck – of getting out of our narrow places. Our goal is to open ourselves up to our potential and to struggle, to mature, to continue to grow in wisdom and in kindness.

Our prayer together is one of the ways we begin to get unstuck. The Psalmist said, “I cried out to You from a narrow place, and You answered me from an open space.” We call out from that narrow place in our souls, and when we open our hearts in prayer we may find ourselves open to answers we could not see before. The Hebrew word for prayer, *l’hitpalel*, literally means to judge oneself. The image of God on a throne as judge is a metaphor for the real work of the High Holy Days, when we must look back on the past year and judge ourselves. We talk about God as a judge not because we believe there is a supernatural being accounting for and judging all of our actions, but because this is what we need to be doing for ourselves on Rosh Hashanah. We need to take an honest look at ourselves as we truly are.

This is easier said than done. We don’t often want to acknowledge our flaws or weaknesses or shortcomings. Rabbi David Ellenson teaches that human beings “are most comfortable seeing ourselves as creatures of power, majesty and strength.” (1) He writes that our High Holiday prayerbook reminds us of something we’d rather deny: that we are human; that we are frail and needy and finite. Our prayers force us to confront our true nature because they force us to view ourselves honestly.

When we hide from knowledge of ourselves — when we lie to ourselves — we are hunkering down in that narrow place. The Hebrew word for a lie is “*sheker*,” with the Hebrew letters shin, kuf and resh — three letters that are all next to each other in the Hebrew aleph-bet. This teaches us that lying is a form of narrow-mindedness — that lying comes from a narrow place, not from our best selves. On the other hand, the Hebrew word for truth is “*emet*,” with the Hebrew letters aleph, mem and tav — aleph is the first letter in the aleph-bet, mem is in the middle, and tav is the last letter. From this we learn that truth is broad and all-encompassing; truth is open and freeing. (2) When we call out from that narrow place, it is the truth that brings us out into the open space and gives us room to struggle and grow.

When we get stuck in that narrow place we often can’t see a way out. We develop tunnel vision, and we start to think that the way we have been doing thing is the only

way, and we can't see any other direction to travel. We can get stuck with a negative perspective; we tell ourselves over and over that we can't, that it is too hard to change, that we are too old, that we will change once we get that promotion or lose five pounds, or after the holidays, or we will change next year. But the longer we stay there, the more the walls seem to close in, and get closer and closer, and soon we are stuck in that narrow place.

Once we are trapped in the narrow place we get used to it. It is easier to look back on the past year and justify our bad choices and we may try to alleviate our guilt by blaming the circumstances, or other people — but when we do this, we are not doing the work of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is uncomfortable to look at our flaws, and while we may spend most of the year minimizing our faults, on these Days of Awe we need to bring them into the light. It can feel uncomfortable, like we are physically struggling to get out of the narrow place, and we're scraping up against rock and stone, but it is only by facing that discomfort, recognizing the things about us that do not fit, that we can truly change. During the High Holy Days, we need to broaden our vision and see ourselves clearly in order to move out of that narrow place.

Another way to move out of that narrow place is to reframe how we think about the changes we need to make. Many of us will make some kind of resolutions in this new year; if we are doing the work of the Days of Awe we know that we can do better next year. We can be more loving and less judgmental; we can develop healthier habits; we can spend more of our time doing the things that matter us; we can become more generous and less easy to anger. We know how we want to fill the clean pages in our Book of Life, and this moment, today, Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world is a good day to start.

Many of the ways we will want to change involve the words "I have to." I have to start eating healthier. I have to go to the gym more. I have to be nicer to my co-workers. I have to go to synagogue more. I have to be less judgmental, I have to spend more time with my family. Dr. Susan David, a professor of Psychology at Harvard and the author

of “Emotional Agility” teaches that our “have to” goals become chores. If you are only exercising because you have to, you will look for excuses not to go. If you are only calling relatives out of obligation, how meaningful will your conversations be? “Have to” goals are imposed on us, often by a nagging loved one, or a doctor, or by our own sense of obligation.” (3)

Dr. David teaches that by changing your self-talk from “I have to” to “I want to” you will be more successful with your goals. So instead of, “I have to call my sister more,” one might say “I want to have a good relationship with my sister.” Then when you call her, you are more likely to have that meaningful conversation.

“Want to” goals reflect our genuine interests and values — our “why.” We pursue “want to” goals because of personal enjoyment, because of the inherent importance of the goal, or because the goal is a part of our core identity. These goals are freely chosen by us, and if you can’t find a “want to” reason for the things you “have to” do, perhaps it is because they do not align with your values, and it is a sign that you need to make a change. (4)

You can choose to apologize to someone you hurt out of a sense of obligation or social niceties or because Jewish tradition demands it this time of year. Or you can choose to apologize because you care about your relationship, you view t’shuvah as an important quality and you want to grow as a person.

What do you want to do better this year? Do you want to be kinder? Do you want to make your relationships a priority? Do you want to spend more time making this world a better place?

Are you here this morning because you have to be? Because someone else insisted that you be here?

What if you framed it in terms of what you want? Are you here because you want to be with your family? Do you want to connect with your community? Do you want to be a part of the larger Jewish community that is all praying today? Do you want to find joy in prayer and song? Do you want the time and space to reflect and improve? What is your bigger goal? Why do you want to be here? (5)

This requires some self-work to determine what it is you truly want in the new year, and that is part of what we are doing here this morning, and over the next 10 days. We ask ourselves who we want to be; we ask ourselves how we want to spend our time.

Imagine how your life would be different a year from now if you made just one change. Imagine what your life would look like when you are 99 years old if you were to make that one change. What is holding you back? What will it take for you to start? Maybe you need a wake-up call?

Rosh Hashanah and the sound of the shofar should shake us out of our narrow places. It is an alarm that reminds us that now is the time, this day, this moment, when we need to make a change, when we let go of the things from the past year that are holding us back, and open our arms wide to the potential of the new year.

We read this morning how Abraham thinks that sacrificing his son Isaac is the only way to fulfill God's command, but it turns out that God had another way in mind and shows him the ram tangled in the thicket. Our midrash adds to the story by explaining that the ram kept trying to pull itself free but kept getting tangled up in the bushes and that this is a metaphor for the Jewish people who get caught in their sins and mistakes year after year.

Rabbi Yaffa Epstein teaches that: "It is not simply that the ram was caught by its horns in the thicket, but that the ram was repeatedly getting itself stuck. Just as it managed to free itself, it found its horns stuck in the next thicket. Many times in our lives, we are stuck in some problem or another, and just as we are getting over that problem, just as

we are making progress, we find ourselves caught up in another issue, and another. It feels as though we can never change, grow, or move on. The horns of the ram remain stuck when the ram keeps its head down, entangling them again and again. The cry of the shofar however, reminds us to raise our heads; to have faith in our potential to change. Thus, with our heads raised, we will be able to see more clearly, and avoid those pitfalls that allow us to stay stuck. The shofar then, is a wake-up call to us to have faith in our own potential for growth and change.” (6)

The shofar is curvy, not straight — and from that we learn that we, too, need to bend in the new year. We can not hold ourselves stiff and unchanging; we need to be flexible if we are going to grow and wiggle out of that narrow space.

The shape of the shofar goes from narrow to wide — the same direction that it grows from the ram’s head. The shape teaches us that we need to widen our view, that growth should make us more open-hearted to the people we love, more open-minded in the world and more open to change.

This is the wake-up call that it is time to get unstuck, to get out of that narrow space and move towards something better.

We spend these days of awe talking about the Book of Life because we know that our time is limited and that it is up to us to make the most of each moment. We are reminded to live each moment to the fullest and to get out of our narrow places and to live out in the open, open to all the new year might bring.

May you open your heart to love.

May you open your arms to caring.

May you open your eyes to the beauty in the world.

May you open your mind to wisdom.

May you be open to all the potential and blessing in every moment of this new year.

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1. Rabbi David Ellenson, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, CCAR Press, p.xxiv
 2. Joel Grishaver, *Stories We Pray*
 3. <https://ideas.ted.com/want-to-help-your-resolutions-stick-make-this-one-word-change/>
 4. Ibid.
 5. Questions inspired by Rabbi Jamie Korngold, *The God Upgrade*
 6. Rabbi Yaffa Epstein, Pardes, <https://elmad.pardes.org/2018/08/the-pardes-rosh-hashana-companion/>