

The Tipping Point – a teaching from Maimonides

Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 3:4 (derived from Eliyahu Touger translation)

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Ha-Shanah is a decree, it contains a mystical hint. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying:

Wake up, you sleepy ones, from your sleep! And you who slumber, arise! Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the emptiness of time and throughout the entire year are devoting their energies to nothingness and emptiness which will neither benefit nor save. Look to your souls! Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon their evil path and thoughts.

Accordingly, throughout the entire year, a person should always look at oneself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If one performs a single sin, one tips one's balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon oneself.

[However,] if one performs a single *mitzvah*, one tips one's balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to oneself and to others. This is implied by [Proverbs 10:25] "A righteous person is the foundation of the world," i.e., one who acts righteously tips the balance of the entire world to merit and saves it.

For these reasons, it is customary for all of Israel to give much *tzedakah*, perform many good deeds, and be occupied with *mitzvot* from Rosh Ha-Shanah until Yom Kippur to a greater extent than during the remainder of the year. During these ten days, the custom is for everyone to rise [while it is still] night and pray in the synagogues with heart-rending words of supplication until daybreak.

- Of what truth (*emet*) might Maimonides think the shofar reminds us?
- How do you feel about seeing ourselves as perfectly balanced between "merit and sin"? What are some advantages? How about drawbacks?
 - Similarly, what are the drawbacks and advantages of seeing ourselves as able to "tip the balance" of the whole world through one's actions?
- How might this text inspire us to listen to the shofar's call in a new way this year?

A Year of Change – two perspectives

Refusal (Tales of the Hasidim by Martin Buber)

On the eve of the New Year Rabbi Mendel entered the House of Prayer. He surveyed the many people who had come together from near and far. “A fine crowd!” he called out to them. “But I want you to know that I cannot carry you all on my shoulders. Every one of you must work for himself.”

Your Book of Life (from Mishkan Hanefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe – a teaching by Rabbi Laura Geller)

Your Book of Life doesn't begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like.

But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day — by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. *Shanah tovah* means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.

- Each of these texts speaks about personal agency and free will; the need for each of us to engage with our own process of *teshuvah* and renewal.
 - How are these texts similar and where do they differ?
 - How does the rebbe's statement harmonize with the teaching that we each get to “edit” our personal Book of Life?
 - How do you feel about each one?
- Are there any personal rituals or customs that help you do the work of *teshuvah* and productive change? What are the obstacles to bringing change to your life? How might your experience of the High Holidays help you to overcome them?