

Ten years ago I began attending High Holiday services for the first time in my life. As the new “son-in-law” I dutifully attended Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services in Boston alongside my partner Adam, his brother David and their mom, Lorna. It felt foreign -- the shofar blowing and New Year wishes on Rosh Hashanah. But as a former Roman Catholic, I was immediately struck by the liturgical forms of confession and atonement. **Al cheit, al cheit, al cheit** we pray. **For the sin of gluttony. For the sin of arrogance, For the sin of irreverence. Forgive us.** “ And so on. “I can do THIS,” I thought. It isn’t so much different than “mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.”

As a former Catholic, I was used to the frequent cataloguing of my shortcomings before G-d – ferreting out the sins of COMMISSION, the sins of OMISSION, the mortal and the venial, avoiding the NEAR occasion of sin, doing penance and seeking absolution. This seemed even easier. No need to go down on my knees with a priest in private confession. And only once a year! But deep down I knew what I always knew. No one day or act can wipe the slate clean. Regret and forgiveness are a never ending process. And real reconciliation only comes when we resolve to change the way we think and act.

With each passing autumn, I hope my understanding of these Days of Awe has become more nuanced. It was here at Rodeph Sholom that I began to learn to see sin not as a fatal alienation from G-d, but as a failure to make the mark – to fulfill G-d’s commandments in a way that benefits my brothers and sisters and the world. And it was here that I learned that Teshuvah is necessary for righting ourselves, turning from that which what separates us from the divine and each other so that we can grow and live.

Al cheit, al cheit, al cheit. So many shortcomings this year. Where do I find my bearings and how should I turn? I believe that one of most essential ingredients for Teshuvah is **gratitude**. Regret is necessary, but gratitude sets us on a path for the future. In their book *Transforming Anger*, Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman tell us that consciously shifting to a feeling of appreciation is one of the most effective tools to quickly transform a sudden burst of anger. I think it can also transform the breast-beating regret we feel as we consider our failures to make the mark last year. It helps us forgive ourselves and to reconcile with G-d and our community.

5768 began as a year when I was looking outward towards big events. I started the year as a fundraising consultant for a politician and imagined the battle of the national and state elections in 2008. I was focused on the grand themes of equality, reform and change, but life confronted me family sickness, death, and the adoption of a new son.

It never ceases to amaze me how the canvas of life can be telescoped so quickly. My world grew smaller, more intimate. My own mom confronted the likelihood of dialysis as her kidneys continued to fail. We watched as Lorna, Adam’s beloved mom and my daughter Ruthie’s effervescent grandma, succumbed to a fatal cancer. And we welcomed our new son, Alexander, to our lives in the midst of it all.

We lived out of a suitcase much of the summer in my mother-in-law’s house as she began home hospice and a steady decline. Images of oxygen tubes, health care workers and morphine administration joust with ones of Ruthie having Jell-o parties in grandma’s bed or the times when baby Alexander nestled next to his grandma so she could count his fingers and toes. I was glad to be with her, but feeling the confinement acutely. I dreaded the

inevitable but unknown time of her death and screamed inside at the injustice of it all. How many times was I so preoccupied with my own anger and unease that I neglected Adam? Did I tell her that I loved her when she could hear it? Did she know that I think her sons are two of the smartest, kindest and irreverent guys on the planet? I'm sorry that I complained that she was sometimes bossy or inflexible. **Gratitude.** I am grateful that I was able to know her for a decade. Thankful that we had two and half wonderful years after her cancer diagnosis to live and love each other. I'll never forget what a fantastic grandma she was and will give thanks every day for the wonderful family she created and to which she welcomed me. G-d let me turn from the sadness, anger and remorse for things unsaid to think about the blessing of my family. Help us enjoy the privilege of living this year and forgive our petty complaints.

As anyone who has parented an infant knows, baby care also has a fairly telescopic, even claustrophobic effect. No longer free to go out of the house at the time of your choosing or sleep through the night, you become captive to hours – feeding, changing, napping, feeding again. My day as a full-time parent follows the rhythm of the sun and the baby's digestion. Maybe I'll get a good shower today and maybe I won't. Maybe I'll get us out for a walk or maybe we'll end up staying indoors. Maybe I will change shirts five times because he spits up so much! How many times did I forget the miracle of Alexander and focus instead on what it was costing me? How often did I let loneliness and my jealousy of Adam's going outside of the home for work turn into angry resentment? And how many times did I squelch my daughter Ruthie's new "big sister enthusiasm" and spunky sense of joie de vivre by putting her in front of the TV and snarling "I have to look after your little brother so go sit here until I come for you." I am so grateful to have these children. I never thought I would have kids. G-d let Ruthie's gorgeous smile, Adam's help and Alexander's open-mouthed grin put me back on track to being a better, more patient father and partner this year.

Next week I'll stand in the presence of G-d and in the presence of you my fellow Jews to try to publicly confess and make a stab at atonement. May we temper the next few days of solemn contemplation with gratitude. And may this transformative emotion give us what we need to truly experience Teshuvah this year.

I close by quoting a prayer that never fails to ignite gratitude and a sense of hope. It is not a special High Holiday prayer, but one that is part of the Tefilah in our weekday prayers, on Erev Shabbat and on Shabbat. It is the Modim.

We gratefully acknowledge that You are the Adonai our G-d and G-d of our people, the G-d of all generations. You are the Rock of our life, the power that shields us in every age. We thank You and sing Your praises: for our lives, which are in Your hand; for our souls, which are in Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence we encounter every day; and for Your wondrous gifts at all times, morning, noon and night. You are Goodness: Your mercies never end; You are Compassion: Your love will never fail. You have always been our hope. For all these things, O Sovereign G-d, let your name be forever exalted and blessed.

GMAR CHATIMA TOVAH – may you be sealed and blessed with a good year. A year filled with gratitude.