

Yom Kippur 5785  
Congregation Or Ami  
Houston, TX  
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October 12, 2024

Boker Tov. Shabbat Shalom. V'Hag Sameach. Today is called Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. A day for taking stock and responsibility for who we have been in total over the past year. What are the steps that we as individuals must do to reset the scale? In this time of reflection, of taking stock, one of the ways we prepare ourselves is a practice called, "*Heshbon HaNefesh*" or an "Accounting of the Soul" ...

But what does that mean? How does one perform *Heshbon HaNefesh*?

To most, I think it is taken to mean to sit and reflect on all the sins you have performed over the past year and resolve to do better for the

next. I'll beat my chest, I'll say an al chet and next year maybe I won't have so many for which to apologize. For some, that may be sufficient.

But I'd like to offer another take on what it means to take an

accounting of one's soul. My good friend, Rabbi Dovid Goldstein of

West Houston Chabad, shared with me a new insight into *Heshbon*

*HaNefesh:*

First, some context; Rabbi Mencham Mendel Futerfas was a great Lubavitch rabbi who clandestinely created religious schools in Soviet Russia and survived 14 years living in a Siberian Gulag. Later he came to the US before settling in Israel. He was hugely respected for his unique insights and applications of Jewish law and studies. Once, during the

*Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the 10 days of repentance from Rosh HaShana through Yom Kippur, he was meeting with the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Leader of Chabad Lubavitch at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, the Global Headquarters of Chabad. When he came-out of the Rebbe’s study, he saw a couple of students studying in the Beith Midrash. Being a rabbi and seeing studying students, he knew he needed to ask them a question. Rabbi Futerfas asked them, “Nu— What does it mean to do *Heshbon HaNefesh?*” Now, as you can imagine, a group of students being asked such a question from such a famed rabbi, the students were at a loss for words. Upon hearing silence in response, Rabbi Futerfas offered an explanation similar to the

one I shared earlier. He asked if they thought that it is reflecting on all the misdeeds you have done over the past year, repenting and planning to do better in the coming year. The students hurriedly agreed. Rabbi Futerfas retorted, “No! That is not *Heshbon HaNefesh!* Rather, true *Heshbon HaNefesh* is recounting all the blessings you have experienced over the past year and then reflecting on if you were properly grateful to God for all the bounty you received.”

When I heard this story, a smile spread across my face. This is a beautiful insight both of *Heshbon HaNefesh* but also for these holy days: take stock of the joy and blessings that have entered your life over the past year and make sure you were thankful for them.

With Rabbi Futerfas' insight, we have two different implementations on taking an accounting: One focusing on sin and the other on blessings.

With all due respect to Rabbi Futerfas, I think that *Heshbon HaNefesh* is not one or the other, but rather a bit of both. We are all pretty good at tallying our sins, even outside of the high holy days. Remembering them keeps us up at night and gives us anxiety. But we are less skilled at noting our blessings. I think that what Rabbi Futerfas is reminding us of is that what comes in is just as important as what goes out. In accounting, you record your debits but also your credits. Today, as we are atoning, we should not be focused only on the negative. There is the positive that should not be ignored. We have had time over the last

nine days to remember all our missteps. We have beaten our chests and confessed time and again in our liturgy. Yom Kippur has no shortage of prayers accounting for our sins. But there are not specific prayers for the High Holidays calling us to thank God for our blessings.

And while we do end our Amidah with the *Modim* Prayer which is a catch-all expression of gratitude, it does not resonate the same way as *Ashamnu* and the *Al-Het*. This leads to a mindset which makes it very easy for us as a people to discount the positive.

And did you know that discounting the positive is surprisingly the norm? I have learned from my therapist that this is a common cognitive distortion. We simply ignore evidence of the good that has

occurred to us; it is so much easier to focus on the negative. This strategy is significantly flawed because it is only looking at part of the equation. You cannot balance a budget by only looking at expenditures. If you responded in that way, you would impose such austerity that life would not be healthy. We need to allow for and recognize our income. To perform a proper accounting, we need to reflect on the good we have experienced.

There is another aspect to Rabbi Futerfas' advice that resonates with me, and I'd like to share with you. Not only should we focus on the blessings and boons in our life but also cultivate a sense of gratitude for

those moments. Gratitude allows us to direct the grace and benefit we have received and reflect it into the larger world.

My hope is that we will be able on this Yom Kippur to not only reflect on what we want to change about ourselves and our actions, but also to take into account those moments that inspired us and use those “warm fuzzy” thoughts as seeds to build hope for our new year. May we move from strength to strength, from joy to joy. Let us be happy about the times our community came together. The way that we experienced love and support. Those times we lost ourselves in peals of laughter, enjoyed the power of a beautiful piece of music or a conversation with an old friend. While there was a fair share of tragedy

in this past year, there were also moments of blessing and light. May we learn to focus on those moments with gratitude and cultivate a sense of appreciation as we move into the new year.

May we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life!

Gemar Hatimah Tovah!