



Head, Heart and Soul

THE FESTIVALS OF TISHREI



Head

It is fascinating that the Hebrew for our New Year is Rosh Hashanah – the Head of the Year – and not the more obvious term *Reishit HaShanah*, which means the beginning of the year.¹

So why did our Sages pick this term – the head – to define the first festival of the year

It seems that the head and mind are the keys to understanding the essence of the day.

On the anniversary of Creation, we aim to envision and recreate in our minds the ideal world we would like to live in and the ideal role we would like to play in it.

It's a time of deep cognitive reflection.

We examine our spiritual and mental paradigms, thought processes and mindset as we address the salient issues of life in preparation for the year ahead. It's a time for big picture mind mapping rather than meddling in minutiae.

There is no focus on individual actions nor any mention of sin – not one single confession – throughout the lengthy prayer service. We dare not get lost in the details lest we fail to distinguish the woods from the trees. It's not a time 'to be rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic,' but rather to ensure that we are heading in the right direction. The *shofar* is the instrument of the day and the echo of Jewish history calling us to

recalibrate our moral course and reset our spiritual compass.

Rosh Hashanah is an intense exercise in systematic and strategic spiritual thinking.

Heart

Yom Kippur is all about Service of the Heart – *Avodat HaLev*.²

The ideal exists in our head, whereas actual change happens through the heart. Our inner will – our *ratzon* – is the engine of personal transformation. Yom Kippur is a day that rotates around the axis of will, want and desire. It demands a detailed spiritual makeover to align our will with the Divine Will in every area of life. That is why *vidui* – personal

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confession – is the essence of the day. We strike our chest and heart dozens of times, acknowledging where we have deviated and expressing our deepest desire to return to the right path.

Where there is a will, there is always a way back.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; head and heart, ideal and real, macro-thinking and micro-planning, intertwine to give us unparalleled days of spiritual inspiration.

Soul

Nevertheless, despite these spiritual peaks, something is sorely missing from this religious equation: *simcha* – happiness and joy. *Simcha* is the true soul of Judaism, for at its core it is not only a religion but a celebration of religious life.³

The *Yamim Nora'im* are truly Days of Awe. Throughout the 10 Days of Repentance the theme of judgment, of “who will live and who will die,” creates an inescapable mood of sobriety, an undertone of fear and trepidation.

Furthermore, in our plea for atonement on Yom Kippur, we have ‘afflicted’ ourselves by refraining from the basic normative life pleasures. In our quest for forgiveness and purity, we have necessarily but unnaturally detached ourselves from the fullness of life. This tense and intense time has taken its toll.

And this is the reason why – explains Rav Kook⁴ – Sukkot comes immediately after Yom Kippur. We are in

desperate need of an injection of joy to reinstate the vigor and vibrancy of life.

Spiritual life had become imbalanced through the uplifting yet energy-depleting motif of judgment, fear and fasting.

Sukkot restores the balance through a love of life, a celebration of *mitzvot*, with the festival’s unmatched ambience of joy, *joie de vivre* and rejoicing in G-d’s presence.⁵

It seems to me that this message is particularly relevant for Tishrei 5781.

This New Year brings with it a deep sense of vulnerability during these unusual and unpredictable Corona times. None of us quite knows just how long it will continue – whether it will end soon, which we all pray for, or whether it will be the ‘new normal’ for the year ahead.

One thing is clear – we need to dig deep and engage these times with the holistic spiritual paradigm of Head, Heart and Soul.

Therefore, if we look at the festivals of the month as one unit, they encompass the complete religious experience in preparing for the coming year.

They express the aspiration for a holy life as a wholesome spiritual endeavor – a harmonious synergy of both body and soul. Intertwining love and fear, separation and integration, solemnity and celebration, they give us the ultimate blueprint to face the year ahead.

A healthy, happy and sweet year for one and all!

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- 1 *Reishit* is the obvious word as it is not only the first word in the Torah – *BeReishit* – but it is also mentioned in Devarim (11:12) as ‘the beginning of the year’ – *Reishit HaShannah*. Additionally, it is from this verse that the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) learns the concept of judgment at the beginning of the year impacting the rest of the year, which forms the Biblical basis for Rosh Hashanah being a Day of Judgement. Nevertheless, our Sages chose Rosh Hashanah as the name of the day and hence the name of the Tractate and the universally used name of the festival.
 - 2 Our Sages define prayer as *Avodat HaLev* – service of the heart (Ta’anit 2a, Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:1.) Yom Kippur is a unique day of intense prayer encompassing five distinct prayer services.
 - 3 The verse explicitly states that the root cause of the terrible curses mentioned in *Parashat Ki Tavo* is serving G-d without happiness and joy – “since you did not serve the L-rd your G-d with happiness (*simcha*) and with gladness of heart...” (Devarim 28:47). It is clear that scrupulous observance of Torah and *mitzvot* devoid of *simcha* is not a religious life but rather a spiritual curse.
 - 4 Orot HaTeshuva 9:10.
 - 5 The imperative of *simcha* on Sukkot is mentioned three times in the Torah, more than any other festival. One famous expression of this is stated in the Mishna (Sukkot 5:1), “That one who has not seen the *simcha* of the water-drawing ceremony (which took place every evening on the intermediary days of the festival) has not seen *simcha* in his life.” Moreover, Shemini Atzeret is the pinnacle of the *simcha* of Sukkot and is solely dedicated to happiness, simply rejoicing in G-d’s intimate presence without need of any command or action; neither Sukkah nor species, as the Talmud learns (Sukkah 48a) from the verse “and only be happy.” It is, therefore, no surprise that our Sages later instituted *Simchat Torah* on this festival (on the same day in Israel) as an expression of our joy at our very connection to Torah.

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