

Zero Waste

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By Rabbi Samantha Natov

We are not starting with a clean slate. The reality of COVID has changed everything. This year, we may be stuck at home, confused, uncertain, unemployed, underemployed, ill or recovering from illness, grieving a loss, isolated and disoriented. We carry all this into this new year.

We'd like to start fresh, with nothing weighing us down. But that is impossible.

We are hurting and we, too, have hurt people, knowingly or unknowingly. We have undervalued others and ourselves.

We've changed, and so has our world. Yet Rosh Hashanah has not. We read the same liturgy as we did last year, but this time we are weighed down with uncertainty, anxiety, and even fear. This is the honest truth.

But what is also true is that within us we hold a mixture of bad and good, dark and light, trash and treasure.

Tonight we begin Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance. It's time to remember. We can't throw away parts of ourselves, though we may wish we could. We cannot discard painful memories. We cannot sidestep shame. We do not rid ourselves of regrets.

In fact, during these High Holy Days, we bring them close. We dwell in discomfort. Regret and shame unexamined are like the undertow of the ocean, pulling us down when we don't expect it.

But when we closely examine these feelings, they can no longer function as unseen drivers in our lives. We can integrate the discomfort and move towards a sense of wholeness. When we accept our mistakes, sit with them, atone for them, our feelings around them lose their sting. Once we have earnestly asked for forgiveness, we can forgive ourselves and uncover a sense of freedom.

Yet we are not starting with a clean slate and frankly, we never have.

Instead, we can embrace the philosophy of "Zero Waste." From our social experiences to our innermost thoughts, we can work towards having zero waste in our lives.

We can learn from our mistakes and rebuild out of regret. We don't need to start from square one. Our regrets give us raw material — something to start with.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. We read:

"In the beginning, God created heaven and earth..."

...out of chaos — *“tohu va vohu”*

God separated light and darkness, land and sea. Nothing was thrown out; there was no trash.

What steps do we need to take to make order from the chaos of our lives? We consider what matters. We take note of our priorities. We make separations. We distinguish between what we want to keep close and what we imagine to be no longer relevant.

In East Harlem there is an unofficial trash museum started by a third-generation New York City sanitation worker named Nelson Molina. He would often rescue bags from the trash compactor, and say, “Hold up. Something good's in there. I just know it.”

He rescued vintage cameras, discarded police chief badges, mounds of Swatch watches, dozens of Pez dispensers, outdated kitchen tools, antique pharmacy scales, and old electrical outlet plates.

He picked up the things we left behind, items we no longer wanted or didn't know what to do with — things that at one time or another were of some value and meaning to us: an old taxi meter that represented someone's livelihood, a gold watch retirement present — even actual money that had been thrown away in the trash.

What are the scraps of ourselves we have abandoned, rejected and pushed away, never realizing we were throwing gems into the trash? What are the things we have thrown away without even being conscious of doing it? Friends we kept meaning to call until years went by. Discarded practices that once uplifted our days. Abandoned joys and parts of ourselves left unexpressed.

The work of these High Holy Days is devoted to self-reflection. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov told a story about an angel who watches over people all the time, even in the dark. This angel is named Yodea, the Angel of Losses. Yodea translates as “One who knows.” The Angel of Losses knows what we left behind. He watches as our lives unfold, taking note of every detail.

It's an enormous task and Yodea has helpers, and even his helpers have helpers. Each one carries a shovel, spending all of their time digging, all the while searching for losses — for a great deal is lost during our lives.

And how do they find what we lost? After all, our losses live in the realm of the unknown. They need a light. Not just any light — they need the light emanating from each person's soul. For the soul itself is a light planted in each one of us. It is not like a torch, but more akin to a small candle.

Yet, with this light we can search inside deep wells, where darkness is unbroken, peering into every corner and crevice. Small though it may be, it is necessary to be guided by that light.

What have we lost? What are the losses that Yodea is picking up for us, whispering in our ear: Don't abandon this: remember it has meaning for you. What do we need to recover?

Yodea, the Angel of Losses, the one who knows, is like a guide for *chashbon hanefesh* — the kind of soul searching we do on Rosh Hashanah. While we may want to throw out experiences, feelings, or parts of ourselves we do not like, Yodea helps us to reconsider and recognize what value these things still hold.

A Sufi folktale: Mulla Nasrudin decided to start a flower garden. He prepared the soil and planted the seeds of many beautiful flowers. But when they came up, his garden was filled not just with his chosen flowers but also overrun by dandelions. He sought out advice from gardeners all over and tried every method known to get rid of them, but with no success. Finally, he walked all the way to the capital to speak to the royal gardener at the sheik's palace.

The wise old man suggested a number of remedies to get rid of the dandelions but Mulla had already tried them all. They sat together in silence for some time and finally the gardener looked at Mulla and said, "Well, I suggest you learn to love them."

We have lost so much. Our work and education systems are completely disrupted and loved ones have struggled with illness or may no longer be with us.

We are in an economic crisis, a moment of great racial divide and unrest, an absence of real leadership, and a climate crisis that threatens life on the planet. Meanwhile, the world refugee count continues to rise. Anti-Semitism in America and Europe is at its worst in decades, as white supremacists feel emboldened in the current cultural climate, and the extreme left is mired with anti-Israel sentiment.

This year Rosh Hashanah is different. The work of this time feels different because we've spent the last six months questioning so many things about our lives. We have been forced to evaluate our lives in this new context.

We ask ourselves: Is this how we want to be living? Are we fulfilled? Are we giving the best of ourselves to our loved ones?

This is a time when many people are considering major life changes, from changing jobs to moving to new places, to keeping children home from school. We are relating to each other in new ways and we are relating to ourselves in new ways. And in this moment of Rosh Hashanah, we ask ourselves: Are we being who we want to be?

There is a folktale about a man who would carry two pots to a stream each day. He'd fill them up, walk back along the path, and bring the water home.

But one of the man's pots had a crack in it. The pot was ashamed of its brokenness and said to the man, "I'm sorry. I feel as if I've let you down. You do all of this hard work to bring me home

each day, and yet, when you get there, only two-thirds of the water is left in me, as I am broken and imperfect.”

The man responded gently: “As we walk back today from the stream, I want you to look down at the path beneath you.”

On the way home, the pot looked down and noticed that because of the water he had leaked along the way beautiful wildflowers had grown all along the path beneath him.

Context matters. Sometimes traits viewed as undesirable in one context are seen as valuable in another.

What flowers are emerging from our cracked selves? What treasures are we overlooking? What beauty arises from our brokenness?

There are parts of ourselves that we may not like and have been trying to suppress, but we may realize that they have intrinsic worth. Sometimes our internalization of societal hierarchies gets in the way of recognizing true value. Sometimes our expectations of how things should be get in the way of appreciating how things are.

The sound of the shofar wakes us up to seeing things with fresh eyes and a renewed sense of clarity. We are called to search within ourselves and separate meaning from chaos. The kabbalists believe that every action emanates positivity or negativity into the world.

There is no such thing as waste. Everything has to go somewhere. As we move from chaos to separation to reintegration, we open new channels of energy.

We don't have a clean slate, but what we have is better. We have material to work with that provides us with the opportunity for change and renewal.

Not having a clean slate gives us the chance to reach a place of wholeness as we integrate all we are, all we have been, and all we want to be.