

## **Sermon for Rosh Hashanah, Day 2, 5764**

By Rabbi Joshua Cypess

### **A Week of Apples In Honey**

Why apples? Why honey?

Why not a banana in chocolate? Or a quince? We eat apples in honey to have a sweet year. Apples, according to kabbalists (and it should not surprise you that they are involved) are symbols of Paradise. And honey is the promised gift of the Promised Land. But, it could be anything sweet – to symbolize a sweet year.

According to the mystical concept mentioned in the Gemara (TB Horayot 12a, Keritot 6a), when we eat certain foods on the night of Rosh Hashanah, those foods have an effect on the rest of the year.

This is called “simanei milta” – significant omens; and there’s a whole set of them in the Siddur; many involve a bad pun and a food that you couldn’t pay me to eat during the rest of the year (beets, fish heads, fenugreek).

When we eat the food, and say a phrase, we make a metaphysical statement, because we’re told that what we eat – and what we do – on Rosh Hashanah will have an effect on the entire year. In halakha this is taken even further to all actions done on Rosh Hashanah. The law says that if you learn on Rosh Hashanah then you’ll have a year of learning – and if you sleep late on Rosh Hashanah, it means you’ll have a sleepy year (which doesn’t seem bad! – but the Ari z.l. says that God is sitting in judgment in the morning and sleeping late is akin to sleeping in the courtroom during your trial).

Why does this mystical process work? Because Rosh Hashanah has a unique status. Rosh Hashanah is not a time for teshuva! No – that was Elul. It’s a design flaw of the calendar – we put too much emphasis on Tishrei. But Elul is our time to reform, repent and repair and become the person God wants us to be for 5763. Rosh Hashanah is a royal inspection – the day we declare God to be King. It’s on Rosh Hashanah that we stand under scrutiny. It’s the final exam; the audit, the performance review. And a performance review is not a time to do teshuva (because teshuva is a process of criticism, and self-inspection; a performance review is no place for you to tear yourself down).

You stand on Rosh Hashanah proud and perfect – how you act on Rosh Hashanah is how you want God to think of you.

Our tradition teaches us that Rosh Hashanah is the “birthday of the world” – the anniversary of creation. We coronate God as our King on the day God chose to become King by creating the world. When God creates, it’s done with rigorous intention. Everything in creation had a purpose. On the anniversary of creation, God goes through the process of intention all over again. God asks his heavenly court on Rosh Hashanah – “If I created the world again, today, this year, would I keep this person, this congregation, this nation?” When that is going on in God’s head, it must go on in yours as well.

After the inspection, and attempted perfection of Rosh Hashanah, the ten days of repentance – up until Yom Kippur – are for catch-up and hasty restitution. We need to pay back what we owe.

But the mystics give us a further insight into the ten days of repentance. Just as Rosh Hashanah is a day with significance for the future– so, too, all the days of repentance. The Ari z.l. has a stunning insight with a practical implication (normally we’re wary of the mystics – when they’re swinging chickens over their heads or jumping into unheated mikvahs – but, sometimes, they have some very practical ideas).

There are ten Days of Repentance – but three of the days are the High Holidays – leaving seven days, one week. And if you look carefully, you’ll see that there is a complete week: one Sunday, one Monday, etc. in the ten Days of Repentance, and not including Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. These days become iconic days – the Monday of this week should be used to repent for all the Mondays of the previous year. And, on the flip side of repentance, used to refine your character and resolve to be better for all the Mondays in the coming year. (Therein lies the limbo of the ten days – the special gift that God gave the Jews is for the “judgment year” not to end on Rosh Hashanah but to be held in abeyance for one”week” – until Yom Kippur).

We spent Rosh Hashanah in an attempt to affect the whole year with our refined and exemplary behavior – we refined ourselves during Elul and we were exemplary in our prayer, learning, and eating symbolic foods. Each day of the coming week can now be spent in repentance and refinement, regret and resolve, introspection and improvement.

How can we practically use these iconic days to further our character? Each day of the week of Creation had a specific focus. We can use the example of creation to direct our own repair and repentance.

On the first day of creation, God made light. Our tradition teaches us that this isn't ordinary light, but the supernatural luminescence of God's presence, when we can perceive in our world through learning Torah. So on Sunday, the first day of creative repentance, we need to ask ourselves:

1. Have I learned enough this year?
2. Do I set apart time during the day, the week for Torah?
3. Have I made myself a Rabbi – from whom to learn to ask questions
4. Have I acquired a friend? – a chavruta to learn with and keep me going when I lose strength?

On the second day of Creation, God made the firmament – the heavens. On this day we need to assess our fear of heaven; the relationship we have with God and the commandments directed to God (mitzvot bein Adam L'Makom):

1. Am I concerned at all times with doing what God wants me to do?
2. Do I believe there is a seeing eye, a listening ear, and a recording Book for all my actions?
3. Am I concerned with communicating to God with clarity and purity in prayer and in my thoughts during the day?

On the third day of Creation, God made the oceans and the plants from them. The vegetation is our sustenance, so on the third day we need to ask ourselves:

1. How well do we sustain others?
2. Do I consider someone else's needs as important as my own?
3. Are others going hungry, or without shelter, and have I done

enough to prevent it?

4. Have I set aside a portion of my net salary to charitable causes?
5. Have I determined priorities in giving – an organized tzedeka program?

Have I repaid my debts? Are others waiting for me to repay that I have taken?

The fourth day of Creation, Wednesday, God created the luminaries – the lights of the heavens: our luminaries are our family. So on the fourth day we need to ask:

1. Have I shown my family enough love?
2. Do I have open, trusting communication?
3. Do I call my mother!
4. Do I connect with the members of my family who are lonely, infirm, and in need of attention and affection?

On the fifth day of Creation, God made the fish and birds. These are the creatures that Adam and Eve were to govern – and be responsible for. So, on the fifth day we need to concentrate on our responsibilities to others – the "mitzvot bein Adam L'chaveiro":

1. Do I try to see myself in the shoes of another?
2. When I am angry at someone else, do I put myself in their perspective?
3. Do I remember how frustrated or confused I can be when I'm in unfamiliar surroundings or in over my head – and do I help someone who is in the same situation?

On the sixth day of Creation, God created humanity. On this day we need to concentrate on the third interaction: if the second day were "mitzvot bein Adam L'Makom", and the fifth was "Bein Adam L'chaveiro", the sixth day, the day of humanity, the day of mortality, is about "Bein Adam L'atzmo" (obligations of people to themselves), especially the lifesaving task of teshuva:

1. Have I set for myself a process of self-improvement?
2. Have I embarked on the task of really knowing myself?

3. Do I know about my weaknesses which can lead me to hurt others and myself?
4. Do I know about my strengths which can give me confidence for the future?
5. Am I able to accept honest and beneficial criticism from others? Do I consider myself so perfect that suggestions otherwise is an affront?
6. Am I making it difficult for others to improve? I may be too cynical, too against the concept that my actions have an effect on God, the world, my character – but I cannot allow these noxious views from hurting others’ efforts to be better. I must help create an environment that allows others to change in their own process of improvement.

Lastly, the seventh day of Creation, Shabbat Kodesh, God created the concept and the reality of holiness. So we need to ask ourselves on that Shabbat – Shabbat Shuva:

1. Do I lead a life that I can describe as holy? A life of separation and restraint, a life that is a model for others to follow? That’s what holiness is: to teach others the way of God on Earth through exemplary behavior.
2. Can non-Jews look at my behavior and say that Judaism is a way of morality? that we teach that the Torah is true, that God is true because our lives are living examples?

During the “week” of the ten days of repentance, we can take each day as a significant omen, to improve our past deeds and future behavior according to the teaching template set by God in Creation. On the anniversary of the world, we too can be part of God’s perfect vision – and through the process of inspection, regret and resolution, our repentance can seal us in the Book of Life, the Book of Apples in Honey.