

Keeping Things in Balance

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You might expect the tractate of the Talmud called Rosh HaShanah to begin with a discussion of the special customs of this major festival, or its required observances, but instead it starts with a listing of all the different new years that a person living at that time would have experienced.

As *homo religiosus*, the Jew of the Roman period marked one new year, the first of Tishrei, as subjects of the Emperor, and another as *homo economicus*, paying taxes on the produce of fields and fruit trees, as well as the offspring of animals, on three other new years, the most familiar to us being Tu Bishvat, the new year of the trees.

Living today, we also have different identities that come with different new years. As Jews we celebrate Rosh HaShanah; as Americans, January 1; as parents and children, the beginning of the school year in the fall; if we are serious gardeners the beginning of the growing season in the spring, and depending on our workplace or volunteer involvements, we may mark another beginning, of the fiscal year, which can fall at various times. Each identity that we have carries with it its own calendar of special days and observances, its unique demands on our time and efforts.

One of the goals of the reflection we engage in at this time of year is to give us some space to consider our many different identities and how we want to prioritize them and keep things in balance.

Earlier in Elul, those who joined us on a Saturday morning participated in an exercise identifying the six most significant relationships in our lives. Perhaps it's our role as daughter or son, or parent, spouse or friend, worker or volunteer, as a member of the Jewish People, a sports enthusiast, hobbyist, or political activist. We put each of these identities on one of the six points of a Jewish star. In the triangles near the points, we took some notes on how that relationship was shaping up this year, and in the center of the star, some notes on the work we wanted to do during these days of taking stock.

We thought about how happy we were with the distribution of our time and effort among these different roles. Were we as good a friend as we hoped to be? Were we able to juggle home and work, being a parent and being a partner? How was the balance in our lives? Were we satisfied or was there something we wanted to change? If there were things that we intended to do but didn't, can we figure out why they were so difficult to accomplish?

This evening, we thought about religion and science. In regard to these two very different ways of thinking about things, we can also ask: What is the balance in our lives right now between these different ways of relating to the world? Are we invested heavily in the how, without thinking as much about the why? Some associate science and technology with questions about individual accomplishment and achievement, while a religious question might be more about relationships and duties to others. Further, during some periods of our life, being productive is key to our thinking about ourselves. Does religion offer another perspective that gives value to times and seasons that don't have a measurable outcome? We look to science to better understand the world around us, the operation of cause and

effect, but also the mysteries of things hidden from everyday observation. Can the answers science provides fit into a religious framework that offers the guidance of generations as to how we can better relate to one another and motivate ourselves to be more caring and kind?

S'lichot is celebrated not in the light of day, but always late at night, when it was believed our defenses would be down, and we would be more open to introspection and thoughts of change. It marked the intensification of the work of the month of Elul, as the final days before Rosh HaShanah approached. For our Ashkenazi ancestors that meant rising at midnight for at least three nights to recite special prayers of repentance. For us today that may mean carving out some extra time among our many commitments to dedicate to our work of taking stock of our lives and repairing relationships that have gone astray.

May this time we spend together tonight help us sort out the complications of our lives and in ourselves, and emerge, as did past generations, with a sense of clarity and repair, of renewal and reconciliation.