

The days following Rosh HaShanah (Jewish New Year) are called the *Yamim Nora'im*, Days of Awe. These ten days beginning on 1st of Tishri and ending on the most “awesome” day of all, Yom Kippur, (10th day of the month of Tishri) are days during which God is envisioned as seated on the Throne of Judgment with the “Book of Life” in which is recorded the destiny of all. The Book of Psalms alludes to the Book of Life, “...let them have no share of your benevolence; may they be erased from the book of life, and not be inscribed with the righteous” (Ps. 60:28-29). The *Mishnah* advises “Know what is above thee—a seeing eye and a hearing ear and all thy deeds written in a book” (Avot 2:1).

The Book of Life is, of course, a figurative book but the notion that one’s actions in life affect one’s status in the presence of God still holds. The Jewish tradition recognizes that our behavior affects our relationship in two major spheres—in of our relationship with others, and in our relationship with God. The Season of Repentance is 40 days in all and extends from the 1st day of the month of *Elul* (30 days) till the 10th day of *Tishri* (Yom Kippur.) It is on the 1st of the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah, that God is conceptualized as writing the Divine judgment in the Book of Life: Who shall live and who shall die, who will have a good life and who will suffer in the year to come.

Tradition holds that God’s judgment remains unsealed till Yom Kippur. The intervening days are ten days in which to repent and reverse the Divine judgment (Rosh Hashanah 16b). In the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah* (The Ten Days of Repentance) people can take action to change the outcome of the future. The Jewish prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* embodies a dictum that that explicates God’s compassion and mercy for those who repent.

REPENTANCE, PRAYER AND CHARITY ANNUL THE SEVERE DECREE.

U'teshuvah, u'tefillah u'tzedakah maavirin et roa hagezerah

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The Days of Awe provide a window of time in which to repent sins and omissions and seek forgiveness from those who are sinned against. It is also a time to examine one’s conscience with regard to transgression against God, and to walk the paths of *teshuvah*/return to God.

The powerful teaching contained in the Days of Awe is that human beings have the power given by “free will” to embrace a righteous life. The rabbis of the Talmud (*Berechot* 33b) noted that “everything is in the hands of God, except the fear of God” Rabbi Hanina taught, “The fear of the LORD is his treasure” (Isa. 33:6). Fear of the LORD is the treasure which informs freedom of choice. Many orthodox prayer books have written the following words in smaller type above the words of the traditional dictum above. Sincere repentance requires fasting, crying out in a loud voice in prayer, and practical contributions to charity.

<i>tzom</i> (fast)	<i>kol</i> (voice)	<i>mammon</i> (money)
<i>u'teshuvah</i>	<i>u'tefillah</i>	<i>u'tzedakah</i>

While at the *peshat* [simple] level to do *teshuvah* is to repent and seek forgiveness, the Talmud lists *teshuvah* as one of the seven things that existed before God created the world, hinting at a much broader concept—repentance is timeless, indeed, a foundation of the world (Rav. Kook. *Orat haTshuva*). Midrash suggests that the first human being to do *teshuvah* was Adam. When Adam realized the magnitude of his sin he sort to be reconciled with God—to re-establish the intimacy and trust that his actions had fractured. Out of *teshuvah* comes, in this story, not a re-establishment of original innocence but a new relationship—one that emerges from the struggle with the inner self. While *teshuvah* is a life giving action and ensures that we are inscribed in the Book of Life, there is here the realization that we are redeemed *by* our sin.

The mystical tradition sees *teshuvah* as part of a cosmic process in which all creation reaches out to God. All creatures are derived from the divine womb and all that is within us reaches out to return to that source. Jewish tradition understands God as *rachum* (womb). For scripture says, “I am God, I am

womb.” (cf. Ex. 34:6) ...I am a mother’s womb. Of course in the English translation of the Hebrew we do not ‘hear’ the text in the same way. The Hebrew says “*Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum*”. The word *rachum* translated as compassion is the same word as is used for a mother’s womb.

The theme of the Days of Awe is God’s sovereignty. The rabbis have asked the question: “How can God’s sovereignty be proclaimed when such evil exists in the world.” Deuteronomy 10:17 says,

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome...”

The rabbis asked, “How can God be proclaimed All Powerful; All Mighty and the Awesome One when people who commit evil deeds live and succeed and enjoy life.”

THEIR ANSWER WAS LIKE THIS:

In the Book of Deuteronomy God is called the Great, the Mighty and the Awesome (in Hebrew *HaGadol, HaGibor, and HaNorah*). These names, according to tradition, were revealed to Moses. Then Jeremiah came and he did not refer to God as the Awesome one (Jer 32:18). The reason attributed to Jeremiah was the existence of evil: “Aliens are profaning the Temple with great acts of desecration. How then can God be called Awesome?” Hence Jeremiah courageously omitted the name of God *HaNorah*, the Awesome One. Then Daniel came (Dan 9:4) and he omitted God’s name *HaGibor*, the Holy One for, according to tradition, he said, “Alien nations are enslaving our nation and carrying us off to captivity.” Where then are God’s mighty deeds? So for the sake of truth he omitted the name of God *HaGibor*.

But if God is not Awesome and God is not Mighty, how can God be said to be King, the ruler of the Universe? It was then that the sages realized that those who removed God’s titles from respect for the truth were unaware of another truth—God’s great patience. So they restored God’s titles to their former glory. God is God, they said. There is none like God. God *is HaGadol, HaGibor, HaNorah*. God manifested divine Might in that God suppresses divine anger and extends long suffering to the wicked. God manifests divine Awesomeness, in that God allows the wicked to exist for a time. But the day will come when victory will be announced. On that day God will no longer restrain the divine self but “will cry out like a woman in labor” about to give birth to a new life. (Isa. 42:14)

Throughout the Days of Awe people examine their consciences with regard to their behavior. This activity is a prelude to the holiest day of the whole year, Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the day in which the penitent stands before God to confess sins and seek forgiveness. On Yom Kippur the metaphorical “Book of Life” will be closed and sealed for another year.

THERE IS A DISTINCTION IN THE NATURE OF SINS AND FORGIVENESS. On Yom Kippur one may approach God in *teshuvah* for all one’s sins seeking forgiveness for *all those sins* that are against God. The purpose of the many Days of Awe is that we use the time to reconcile and seek forgiveness from people we have wronged (as far as it is possible to do so). Only then can we come before God on Yom Kippur confessing and seeking forgiveness and, ultimately, atonement and catharsis.

On Rosh HaShanah it is written, “How many shall leave this world and how many shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangling and who by stoning, who shall rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted. But, repentance, prayer and charity cancel the stern decree.” ~from the solemn prayer service for Yom Kippur)

ON YOM KIPPUR THE BOOK OF LIFE IS SEALED. BETWEEN THE WRITING AND THE SEALING OF THE BOOK OF LIFE WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE OUR DESTINY.

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