



CORE Groups High Holy Day Experience

Elul: 29 Days of Reflection

Texts and Questions to Facilitate an Accounting of the Soul

29 Days of Reflection

The Hebrew month of *Elul* immediately precedes the “High Holy Days” of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Jewish tradition calls on us to use this month to undertake a “*cheshbon nefesh*,” or “accounting of the soul.”

As Rabbi Alan Lew writes,¹ we remember that on Rosh Hashanah, we “will stand before God.” “What will God see on that day?” Lew asks. “What will you see? This encounter can carry you significantly closer to the truth of your life. Standing in the light of God, you can see a great deal more than you ordinarily might, but only to the degree that you are already awake, only in proportion to the time and energy you have devoted to preparing for this encounter.”

The texts and questions that follow are designed to assist you in preparing your own *cheshbon nefesh*. They cover 29 traits, or *middot* one for each day of the month of *Elul*. Each day, take a few moments to reflect on the trait of the day. You may wish to note your reflections in a personal journal, or to pair up with a partner (*chavruta*), and check in with one another by phone or email. You may also wish to keep a running list of people from whom you need to seek forgiveness, and another list of those you wish to forgive.

It is our hope that by engaging in this sustained period of reflection, you will be better prepared to experience the transformative potential of the High Holy Days.

– Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, Central Synagogue, 2016/5776

¹ Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* (2003), p. 65.

Arrogance / Azut

From our sources:

A man of understanding, who has acquired more knowledge than the average person, has accomplished nothing more than what his nature impelled him to do, as it is the nature of the bird to fly, or of the ox to pull with all its strength. Hence, if a man is learned, he is indebted to natural gifts which he happens to possess. And any one gifted by nature with a mind like his would be just as learned. The man who possesses great knowledge, instead of yielding to pride and self-esteem, should impart that knowledge to those who are in need of it. . . . If a man is rich, let him rejoice in his portion and help those who are poor; if he is strong, let him help those who are weak, and redeem those who are oppressed. For indeed we are like the servants of a household. Every one of us is appointed to some task and is expected to remain at his post and do the work of the household as well as possible. In the scheme of life, there is no room for pride.

– Moses Hayyim Luzzato, *The Path of the Upright* (18th c., Italy).

Food for thought:

Is arrogance a challenge for you? In what situations does arrogance arise for you? Why do you think that is? What might you do to change that?

Think of something good that you accomplished recently. What personal strengths allowed you to accomplish that task? To what extent are those strengths of your own doing, and to what extent are they gifts you were granted, by the Creator, or by others?²

Notes:

² These questions were adapted from those posed in Alan Morinis, *Taking it to Heart* (2014), p.159.

Anger / Ka'as

From our sources:

There are four types of temperaments. One whom is easily angered and easily appeased – his virtue cancels his flaw. One whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease – his flaw cancels his virtue. One whom is difficult to anger and is easily appeased is pious. And one who is easily angered and difficult to appease is wicked.

– *Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 5:14.*

Observe that most men, when they become angry and persist in their anger, do not pay attention to what they do in the great anger, and they do many things in their anger which they would not do otherwise. For anger deprives man of his reasoning, so that he becomes even angrier and enters into dispute and recrimination. Therefore, it is impossible for the angry man to escape great sins. . . . Our Sages have said “a man is recognized in three things.” One of them is his anger. . . . If his anger overpowers his wisdom and he does things in his anger without the guidance of wisdom, in this his anger is recognized. And if his wisdom overpowers his anger, and he holds his tongue and he does not do anything in his anger that he would not do were he not angry, in this his wisdom is recognized.

– *The Ways of the Tzadikim, “The Gate of Anger” (Anonymous, 15th c., Germany).*

Food for thought:

Do you identify with any of the four “types,” listed in the first source? Are you quick to become angry, but forgive easily? Slow to anger but carry a grudge? Have these qualities significantly affected your life over the past year?

Over the past year, have you done something in anger that you would not have otherwise? What would you have done differently if you had taken time before reacting?

What about “righteous” anger? Have you experienced moments where anger motivated you towards positive action?

Notes:

Attentive Listening / *Shmiat HaOzen*

Shmiat HaOzen literally means a “listening ear,” — in other words, to engage in attentive listening.

From our sources:

We learn about a listening ear from a story about Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820-92). A man approached the rabbi to ask if it would be permissible to fulfill the obligation of drinking four glasses at the ritual Passover seder with milk instead of the usual wine. The rabbi asked the man if he was considering making the switch because he was ill. No, the man told him, his health was not the issue. Wine was just more expensive than he could afford.

The rabbi then gave the man twenty-five rubles. After the man left, the rabbi’s wife asked why he had given the man so much when two or three rubles would have been enough to buy wine. The rabbi said, “If that man was thinking of drinking milk at the seder, not only did he not have enough money for wine, he didn’t have enough money for meat or other necessities of the seder either.”

What was the question? Could milk be used instead of wine for the ritual. Was that what [the rabbi] heard? No – because he really listened, he was able to hear so much more.”

– Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

How effectively do you really listen to what others say to you, reflect on it, and act accordingly?

What gets in the way of your being able to listen attentively to others? Do you find yourself planning the next thing you want to say? Distracted by electronics? Wrapped up in your own thoughts? Does this tend to happen more in one area of your life than in others?

What effect has a failure to listen attentively had on your life during the past year?

Notes:

Awe of God / Yirat HaShem

The Hebrew word “*yirah*” connotes three different experiences combined: fear, awe, and reverence.

From our sources:

There are situations in which it is possible to feel fear and reverence and awe in one single, combined inner experience. Imagine, for example, standing at the very lip of a grand valley, looking down into the vast, deep, and magnificent landscape. Wouldn't you feel dread at the sheer drop into the yawning abyss, dumbfounding astonishment at the beauty of the vast and colorful scene, and maybe also awareness of the divine majesty that permeates this magnificent world?

...

Certain situations or experiences call forth awe without any effort at all. Witness a whale breaching or an eagle soaring, hear a baby's first cry or look upon a magnificent sunset, and the heart responds and connects. Those “free samples” of awe take no effort, but if we want to train the heart to open to awe, we must undertake some practice. It needs to be clear, though, that cultivating the capacity to experience awe requires not that you seek out the spectacular, but rather that you endeavor to find the spectacular in everything.

– Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

Have you experienced a “free sample” of yirah during the past year? What effect did it have on you?

How attuned are you to “the spectacular in everything”? Are there specific times or places in which you are more likely to notice the everyday miracles around you?

What do you imagine would happen if you made a practice of noticing the awesome power of the Divine (or nature, or creation) even in everyday situations?

Notes:

Careful Speech / *Shmirat HaLashon*

From our sources:

My God, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception. Before those who slander me, I will hold my tongue, and I will practice humility.

– *Personal Prayer of Mar Bar Ravina (4th c., Babylonia), based on Psalm 34:14.*

Speech is one of the defining features of humanity. It is a powerful tool that creates connections. “Have a wonderful day!” or “So nice to see you!” It only takes a few words. At a deeper level, speech enables us to reveal our innermost feelings and our shared objectives.

But speech can also be very destructive. In a moment of frustration or anger, we can wound someone to the quick; we can gossip or slander and ruin someone’s reputation. Sometimes, in a loving effort to be helpful, we say the wrong thing and make matters worse. And there is a strain of North American culture that equates honesty with criticism—“telling it like it is.”

Often enough, silence may prove to be the holiest response. “I hear you” may be what is needed. We don’t need to fix a friend’s problem or have all the answers. We don’t even need to share similar experiences. What *is* needed is for us to be there, fully present and supportive, sharing the perplexity or pain.

Often our first responses are not the ones grounded in wisdom. When we do speak, we would do well to be aware of our objective. Is this the right moment to voice a criticism or make a suggestion? Perhaps what is called for is what Rabbi Nahman of Braslav called “*divrei hizzuk*” (words of encouragement). He encouraged his followers to speak only words of encouragement to one another.

And when we have the urge to speak badly of a third person (*lashon hara*), we should refrain. Are we doing this in order to build a rapport with our conversation partner at the expense of the third? There are more wholesome ways to build a rapport. Are we doing it out of anger? Anger will subside, but the words we’ve spoken cannot be recalled. Maimonides teaches that all three people (the speaker, the listener and the subject) are damaged by *lashon hara*. Better to be silent until we regain our equilibrium.”

– *Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (<https://tikkunmiddotproject.wikispaces.com>)*

Food for thought:

In what way do you struggle most in cultivating “careful speech”: In refraining from slander? In withholding unwanted advice? In interrupting others?

Are there circumstances in which you tend to be careless in your speech? To whom might you owe an apology based on careless words?

Compassion / *Rachamim*

From our sources:

A midrash addresses the necessary balance of judgment and compassion by relating the following story: There was a king who had some delicate glass cups. He said, to himself, “If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and break, and if I pour cold water into them, they will contract and shatter.” So what did he do? He mixed the hot water with the cold, and the glasses did not break. So it was with the creation of the world, the midrash tells us. At the time of creation, God reflected “If I create the world with only the attribute of compassion, no one will be concerned for the consequences of their actions, and people will feel impunity to act badly. But if I create the world with strict judgment alone, how could the world endure? It would shatter from the harshness of justice. So I will create it with both justice and compassion, and it will endure.”

– *Genesis Rabbah 12:15, as adapted in Alan Morinis, With Heart in Mind*

A habitual ego-bound perspective gives rise to the well-ingrained tendency to look at others with eyes of judgment. What appears before us when we look at another in this way are that person’s accumulated deeds and habits as they stand right now, which we judge from our own vantage point. When we lower or transcend the boundaries of the self, however, and draw closer so that we can feel within us the truth of that other person’s experience, and so see with eyes of compassion, we still ought to see that person as they are now, but something else will also be added to that picture. We will also see more deeply to perceive the untainted soul that is the kernel of that being – the image of the divine that is reflected in ourselves as well. Through close identification we become more generous, forgiving, excusing, overlooking, patient, and forbearing, just as you would expect someone to be to you, if only they would feel what you are feeling.

– *Alan Morinis, With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

How are you at balancing judgment and compassion when it comes to the actions of others? Do you tend toward one extreme or the other? What about when it comes to your own actions?

Think of someone you judge harshly. What keeps you from feeling compassion toward that person? Can you find a point of connection with them -- perhaps only the very fact that you were both created in the divine image? If so, might that connection allow you to consider them with more compassion?

Contentedness / Histapkut

From our sources:

Ben Zoma would say: ‘Who is rich? He who is satisfied with his lot.’

– *Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 4:1*

Who seeks more than he needs, hinders himself from enjoying what he has. Seek what you need and give up what you need not. For in giving up what you don’t need, you’ll learn what you really do need.”

– *Solomon ibn Gabirol, Mivhar Hapeninim (11th Cent. Spain) trans. Borowitz & Schwartz, The Jewish Moral Virtues.*

Food for thought:

Do you find it easy or challenging to be content with what you have? If it is a challenge, what emotions or circumstances do you think affect your general level of contentedness?

Is there anything you might “give up” in order to better learn what you really need?

Notes:

Cruelty / Achz'riyut

From our sources:

Love of all creatures is also love of God, for whomever loves the One loves all the works that God has made. When one loves God, it is impossible not to love God's creatures. The opposite is also true. If one hates the creatures, it is impossible to love God Who created them.

– Yehuda Leow (the “Maharal”, 16th c., Prague), *Netivot Olam*

Too often, people view the natural world not in terms of tenderhearted love but from a utilitarian perspective, calculating the use and value that we can extract from its nonhuman inhabitants. That attitude has caused species to be hunted to extinction and others to be subjugated to oppressive living conditions, like the geese that are caged *en masse* and force fed to produce foie gras, or the production of veal, which typically involves removing calves from their mothers shortly after birth and raising them in special cages that restrict movement so the flesh will be extra tender to the taste.

The activist focus on animal welfare or species preservation is outward looking, concerned with the well-being of the animals, whereas the injunction to love other creatures that we encounter here also invokes an inward focus, concerned for the effect our treatment of other creatures has on our own hearts. When we treat animals as nothing more than a resource to be exploited, we not only do harm to those animals, we also cause the heart within us to become shriveled and hardened.

– Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

Have you taken any measures over the past year to express your love for God's creatures, human or otherwise? Have there been instances in which you acted with indifference to their suffering?

Notes:

Enthusiasm / *Zerizut*

From our sources:

There are two different aspects to the trait of [*zerizut*, which can be translated as “enthusiasm,” “zeal” or “alacrity.”] The first is to be quick to take action. . . . When windows of opportunity open in your life, these may also be invitations from God. Are you quick to recognize and act on the ones that are for the good? The second aspect of enthusiasm involves finding and expressing the energy needed to complete a task. As important as it is to be quick off the mark, it is equally important to sustain energy throughout the whole enterprise. It’s so common for people to begin something with a tank full of enthusiasm, only to grind to a halt when they hit a delay or when some unforeseen obstruction arises, they get bored, or something else gets in the way. It takes enthusiasm not to bog down, wander off, or pull up midcourse, but to press on to finish the good deed with rigor. With regard to this, the Sages said, “A mitzvah is judged only upon its completion.” As much as we like to comfort ourselves otherwise, good intentions are not good enough.

– Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*

Food for thought:

How much enthusiasm and follow-through do you bring to the tasks to which you commit yourself?

As you look over the past year, are there areas where your enthusiasm carried you through perceived obstacles? Are there good intentions that fell by the wayside because your enthusiasm petered out?

Notes:

Equanimity / *Menuchat HaNefesh*

From our sources:

In the Jewish view, the goal of spiritual life is not to reach an enlightened state in which all the questions and conundrums of life are unknotted with finality, but rather to become more skilled at the process of living. This view applies fully to the soul-trait of equanimity, which does not spell the end of our struggles, but rather is an inner quality we can cultivate to equip ourselves to handle the inevitable ups and downs of life.

[Teachers of Jewish ethical tradition] want us to be a calm soul who is like a surfer who rides the waves on an even inner keel, regardless of what is happening within and around him. Even as the waves are rising and falling, the calm soul rides the crest, staying upright, balanced, and moving in the direction the rider chooses. Equanimity is a quality of being centered in yourself, though at the same time being exquisitely sensitive to the forces that are at work all around, or else you will be vulnerable to being tossed around by the sorts of unexpected waves that crash in on everyday life.

[This understanding of equanimity] does not suggest that feelings are idling in neutral. It isn't a kind of numbness. You still register the ups and downs of the feelings – those are the waves – but you stay awake to the experience from an undisturbed place. When you are submerged in your feelings without at least a flicker of self-awareness, the light of consciousness is extinguished, and the doors to connection and choice are closed. But if awareness is calmly present, even amid the storms of life, your soul maintains its connection to others and to the divine source and your free will is preserved.

– Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*

Food for thought:

What ups and downs did you experience over the past year? How well were you able to be self-aware and effective during those times? Did the waves knock you down? If so, what, if anything, helped you get up again?

What contributes or detracts from your ability to feel balanced amid life's inevitable change and turmoil?

Notes:

Faith in God / *Emunah*

From our sources:

Faith demands patience in the face of a future that we cannot see and the determination to make good things happen. If we could know the future with certainty, we would not need faith. But because we cannot know, we have to trust in powers greater than ours to guide us. . . . Faith demands that we engage in a delicate dance of both relinquishing control to an authority above us and acting within our full human capacity to realize our dreams.

On *Rosh HaShana* we celebrate God's kingship by acknowledging God's authority. We recommit ourselves to being faithful servants of the king. A faithful servant does not wait for a better future but, in partnership, creates one."

– Erica Brown, *Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe*

Food for thought:

Think about the events of the past year. To what extent have you been able to relinquish control to an authority above or beyond you? To what extent have you acted within your capacity to realize what God demands of you? Which of these is harder? How do these two aspects of faith affect one another in your life?

Notes:

Falsehood / Sheker

From our sources:

There is a man so false that even if he knows something to be false for a certainty, he is nevertheless drawn after it. . . . But there are some basically truthful men who will not be drawn after falsehood unless they can find some rationalizations, and the wise man, in his wisdom, will quash these rationalizations. And you should know that the rationalizations of all men are generated by their traits. All of the lazy man's rationalizations are generated by his laziness; the angry man's by his anger; the proud man's by his pride. . . . The rationalizations of the extravagant man are generated by his extravagance; those of the miserly man by his miserliness; those of the lover by his love; those of the hater by his hate."

– *The Ways of the Tzadikkim, "The Gate of Falsehood" (anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

Food for thought:

We all have times when we are less than honest, and when we justify our dishonesty with rationalizations. When you think about the last year, which traits have led you to be less than honest? Fear? Pride? Greed? What do you think would happen if you had told the truth instead?

Notes:

Generosity / *Nedivut*

From our sources:

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the The Eternal your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.

– *Deuteronomy 15:7-8*

Giving even a small amount of tzedakah forces us to recognize the extent of poverty in the world, awakens our compassion toward others, and helps us see our wealth as God’s loan to us, rather than as a tribute to our own worth.

– *Jill Jacobs, There Shall Be No Needy*

Our sages of blessed memory have stated further that the trait of generosity resides in habit, for one is not called generous until one becomes accustomed to giving, in every time and season, according to one's ability. For one who gives to a deserving person 1,000 gold pieces at once is not as generous as one who gives 1,000 gold pieces one by one, each gold piece to an appropriate recipient. For one who gives 1,000 gold pieces at once is seized with a fit of generosity that afterwards departs.

– *The Ways of the Tzadikim, “The Gate of Magnanimity” (anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

Food for thought:

As you reflect on the past year, can you think of particular times in which you have you opened your heart and hand to others? Have you held back from extending help to those in need?

Have you made a habit of generosity? If so, how? If not, what would that look like?

Notes:

Gratitude / *Hoda'ah*

From our sources:

Ben Zoma used to say: 'A good guest says, "How much my host toiled for me! He put so much meat in front of me, so much wine, so much bread – all his exertion was just for me!" A bad guest says, "What did my host toil for me? I ate just one roll, just one piece of meat, I drank just one cup – all his exertion was for his own household!"

– *Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 58a*

Many good things are left unenjoyed, and the happiness to be had from them becomes tainted either because people do not recognize the good in it, or they do not realize its value.

– *Bahya ibn Pakuda (11th c. Spain), Duties of the Heart*

The first words out of the mouth of a traditional Jew upon waking are: "I am grateful," *Modeh Ani*. It is not merely a prayer. It is a personal statement of being. It is a reflection on abundance before we have even engaged the world. We are grateful merely for the *fact* of our existence. "I give thanks to You, living and everlasting King, for You have restored my soul with mercy. Great is your faithfulness." My soul has been restored. I can live another day.

Yet as we travel through the rest of the day and face the prosaic cares it spews forth, we understand that rather than set the tone for the day, *Modeh Ani* can feel like a momentary aberration. A day full of gratitude seems increasingly unlikely. We said thank you once and first but may hear and say it less as the hours pass.

– *Erica Brown, Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe*

Food for thought:

Has more of your time this past year been spent like Ben Zoma's "good guest"? Or his "bad guest"?

How often do you stop to give thanks for the life you have, and the world you inhabit? Have good things happened in your life this year that have gone unacknowledged or uncelebrated?

What practice might help you express gratitude on a more regular basis?

Notes:

Honor / Kavod

From our sources:

Ben Yoma used to say: Who is worthy of honor? The one who treats others with honor.

-- Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 4:1

Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua said: "Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own; the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher; and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence of heaven."

-- Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 4:18

Kavod is a palpable sense of presence; it is receiving everyone, including ourselves, with *ayin tovah* – alive with Divine, ultimate goodness. We are getting out of the way of the relentless critic and judge.

--Sheila Peltz Weinberg

Food for thought:

Thinking back over the past year, have there been times in which you felt deprived of honor that you believed was due to you? Have there been times when you made it a point to show honor to others?

To what extent are you able to "get out of the way" of your inner critic and judge, so that you can honor the ultimate goodness in yourself and those you encounter?

Notes:

Humility / Anavah

From our sources:

The Torah calls Moses the “most humble person on the earth.” Right away this tips us off that humility cannot just imply taking a back seat and letting others lead. Moses confronted Pharaoh, led the Israelites out of slavery and challenged both God and the people at moments of crisis in the desert. A Jewish definition of humility is something akin to healthy self-esteem. All middot exist along a continuum. For example, apathy and uncontrollable rage are the extremes of a continuum where patience and appropriate anger sit in the middle. True humility occupies a middle space between self-deprecation on the one hand and arrogance on the other...

According to [Alan] Morinis, . . . the Anav (humble person) knows how much space to take up in any situation. When our Anavah is out of balance we take either too little or too much space.

Think about yourself in different situations. Are you always the first one to talk in meetings or groups? Do you speak several times before some other people speak at all? You may be taking too much space. Or are you the kind of person who hangs back and either doesn't talk at all or says one thing just before the program leader closes the discussion? You may be taking too little space. Our goal is to take the right amount of space in each situation.”

– David Jaffe, *IJS Tikkun Middot Project*, citing Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*

“Humility [] involves having a true and accurate vision of yourself. Many factors and forces pull us away from that truthful accuracy, and none so much as our own ego. Ego is the lens through which we perceive all of life; and if there happens to be any distortion in that lens – whether giving too grand or too insignificant a vision of who we are – then our outlook on everything will be corrupted. That's what makes humility so fundamental to spiritual life.”

– Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

In what situations do you find it easy to take up the “right” amount of space? In what situations do you find yourself taking up too much or too little? How might you guard against distortions of ego that will distort your understanding of the space you are due? What practices might you try as a corrective?

Notes:

Love of God / Ahavat HaShem

From our sources:

V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b'chol l'avvcha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha. V'hayu had'varim ha-eileh asher anochi m'tzav'cha hayom al l'avvecha. V'shinantam l'vanecha v'dibarta bam b'shivt'cha b'veitecha uv'lecht'cha vaderech uv'shochb'cha uv'kumecha. Uk'shartam l'ot al yadecha v'hayu l'totafot bein einecha. Uch'tavtam al m'zuzot beitecha uvish'arecha. L'maan tizk'ru, vaasitem et kol mitzvotai vih'yitem k'doshim l'Eloheichem. Ani Adonai Eloheichem, asher hotzeiti et-chem mei-eretz Mitzrayim lih'yot lachem l'Elohim ani Adonai Eloheichem.

ואהבת את יי אלהיך, בכל לבבך, ובכל נפשך, ובכל מאדך. והיו הדברים האלה, אשר אנכי מצוה היום, על לבבך. ושננתם לבניך, ודברת בם, בשבתך בביתך, ובליכתך בדרך, ובשכבך, ובקומך. וקשרתם לאות על ידך, והיו לטופות בין עיניך. וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך.
למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי, והייתם קדושים לאלהיכם. אני יי אלהיכם, אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים, להיות לכם לאלהים, אני יי אלהיכם.

You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Thus you shall remember to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am Adonai your God.

We typically translate “*levav'cha*” as “your heart” and “*nafsh'cha*” as “your soul.” As used in the Bible, however, from which this prayer is derived, these terms mean something closer to “your mind” (including both the intellectual and emotional aspects of our cognition), and “your self” (including both one’s spiritual aspect and one’s physical body). “*M'eodecha*” is often translated as “your might,” but has been understood to refer to our material resources.

In the view of this central prayer, then, our love of God is shown by acting to fulfill God’s commandments using our minds, our bodies and souls, and the resources at our disposal. (See Joel M. Hoffman in *My People’s Prayerbook: The Sh’ma and its Blessings*, p. 102).

Food for thought:

Which of the three aspects of yourself do you use most often in these efforts: your mind, your body, or your resources?

To what extent are you mindful of this commitment when you are at home or away? When you rise up and when you lie down? To what extent do you offer instruction and support to others in their own endeavors?

Notes:

Lovingkindness / Chesed

From our sources:

In *Pirkei Avot*, we learn that “the world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of God, and upon acts of *chesed*.” . . . We need to be cautious [] around the almost universal translation of the word *chesed* as “lovingkindness.” To my ear, and maybe to yours, too, loving-kindness suggests being *nice*. . .

Chesed involves acts that *sustain* the other. This is a dimension of the notion that doesn’t come through so clearly when [we translate *chesed* as] loving-kindness. In the Jewish view, it isn’t enough to hold warm thoughts in our heart or to wish each other well. We are meant to offer real sustenance to one another, and the ways in which we can do that are innumerable: we can offer . . . time, love, empathy, service, an open ear, manual assistance, a letter written, a call made, and on and on...

[Action] is the key to opening the heart. It is too easy to think good thoughts and say the right things but then just continue to be stuck in the same old ways. We’re too easy to deceive, especially self-deceive. Action is required. Then, through experience, the heart learns and opens, setting off a chain reaction of hearts opening and connecting leading right up to openness and connection to God.

– Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*

The greatest form of Chesed, according to Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (d.2005, Israel), is solidarity, or bearing the burden with the other. Bearing the burden means getting in there and shouldering what your fellow is dealing with, together with him. Maimonides alludes to this type of Chesed in his Laws of Mourning where he writes that escorting a guest into the street is the greatest type of Chesed. Why is it greater to escort a guest out than welcome her in? By escorting, by metaphorically having our arm around our guest in the public realm, we are not only taking care of the needs of the other, but we are walking in his shoes and feeling what it feels like to be him. We are saying, “I am with you and I’ll prove it by being here with you and making myself vulnerable along with you.” This was the Chesed of the freedom riders during the civil rights struggle and of anyone who has stood publically alongside vulnerable people. This is not only empathy but solidarity and these types of relationships truly build the world.

– David Jaffe, *Institute for Jewish Spirituality Tikkun Middot Project (Chesed)*

Food for thought:

During the past year, have you acted to sustain others, whether materially or emotionally? Whose actions have sustained you? Have you been able to make the leap from kind thoughts to action? When you do act on behalf of someone else, do you stand in solidarity with them? What is one act of chesed that you have put off? When might you do it?

Notes:

Mindfulness / Zehirut

From our sources:

A man should be watchful of his conduct. He should scrutinize and pass in review all his actions and habits to determine whether they are right or not, so that he may save his soul from the peril of destruction, and not grope about like a blind man.

-- Moses Hayyim Luzzato, The Path of the Upright (18th c., Italy)

[The watchfulness to which Luzzato refers above] is being mindful of oneself and one's relation to others at every moment. This is a necessary prerequisite to the practice of Mussar [ethical development], whose goal is to become aware of the feelings, actions, and thoughts that constitute a person's psyche. A person begins by developing this awareness after an event, then learns to do so closer and closer to the event, and eventually during the event itself or even before. One who develops awareness during or before an event has conquered the skill of watchfulness that [Luzzato] describes here.

– Ira F. Stone, Commentary on Luzzato's The Path of the Upright

Mindfulness is a mode of careful attentiveness to the whole of one's experience. It emphasizes telling the truth, respecting one's experience, responding rather than reacting, and gently returning one's attention again and again to the initial intention of the practice. It involves an awareness of impermanence, and the interconnection of all that is and a deep appreciation of the fact that every act has an intention and a consequence.

– Sheila Peltz Weinberg, IJS Tikkun Middot Project

Food for thought:

Are you able to act mindfully? When? When do you tend to act without thinking, or without pausing to realize that you have a choice in how to respond? As you look over the past year, do you see any destructive patterns or habits in your behavior, of which you would like to be more mindful going forward? Do you meditate, or have another practice that helps you cultivate mindfulness?

Notes:

Moderation / Shevil HaZahav

From our sources:

One man is lustful, his lust never being satiated, and another exceedingly pure-hearted and not desiring even the few things that the body needs. One man is expansive of temperament, unsatisfied with all the wealth in the world, and another is of constricted spirit, for whom even a bit suffices and he does not rush to obtain all of his needs. One man afflicts himself with hunger and goes begging, consuming not even a penny's worth of his own without dire distress, and another deliberately wastes his money.

– *Introduction to Ways of the Tzadikim (Anonymous, 15th c. Germany)*

A person may say, “Since envy, desire, [the pursuit of] honor, and the like are an evil path and drive a person from the world, I should separate myself from them and move entirely to the other extreme” and as a result he will not eat meat, drink wine, marry, live in a fine home, or wear proper clothes, but rather wears sackcloth and coarse wool and the like, as the pagan priests do. This, too, is a bad path and it is forbidden to follow such a way. Whoever follows this path is called a sinner.

– *Maimonides (d. 1204, Egypt), Hilchot De’ot 3:1*

Food for thought:

To what extent do you tend toward extremes in your emotions and behavior? To what extent are you able to walk the “middle path.”

Which comes more naturally to you: an “all or nothing” approach to behavior? Or the practice of moderation?

Notes:

Order / Seder

From our sources:

Seder literally means “Order.” The word is widely known by even the most marginally connected Jews because of the Passover Seder, a fitting name for such a highly-structured ritual meal. Structure seems to be a key part of this middah, Seder. What is so good about structure? . . . Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm compared Seder to the clasp on a pearl necklace. Picture a pearl necklace with a small clasp. Which is more essential – the clasp or the pearls? At first glance the pearls are more essential. But, without the clasp, all the pearls would scatter and all that would be left is the chain – thus the clasp seems more essential. A person is like a collection of pearls – he is full of potential, talents, character traits and virtues. Seder is similar to the clasp on the necklace. Without Seder all his virtues and talents scatter and he is left empty.”

– *David Jaffe, Institute for Jewish Spirituality Tikkun Middot Project*

Order is all about the middle way. Too little order gives birth to chaos, while at the other end of the range, too much order ties us up in obsessive rigidity. The best in life lies between these extremes, and we are well-advised to seek that moderate course.

– *Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness*

Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind.

– *Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv (19th c. Lithuania)*

Food for thought:

When it comes to order, do you tend toward one extreme or other, or are you able to find the middle path?

Where does an imbalance in one direction or the other affect your life the most?

Which is the bigger challenge for you: imposing order or tolerating disorder?

Notes:

Patience / *Savlanut*

From our sources:

The Hebrew term for patience is *savlanut*. It shares a linguistic root with *sevel*, which means ‘suffering,’ and *sabal*, which means ‘a porter.’ What could these three words possibly share in common? The answer is that being patient means bearing the burden of your own suffering. You tell yourself, I can bear these feelings on my inner shoulders. Holding them aloft and not crumpling under their weight, you are patient.

– Alan Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day*

The problem with impatience is that it usually takes only a split second for its first glowing embers to ignite into flames that course through us even before we’ve become aware that they have started up. Impatience snuffs out consciousness, and before I even know it’s happening, I’m leaning on my horn, or you’re going hoarse yelling at your child, or cursing the postman. At this point, we don’t even recognize ourselves, and there is little to be done but to try to rein in these feelings enough to minimize any damage we might do. . . .

When you find yourself in a situation that is triggering your impatience, instead of giving all your attention and energy to finding fault with the person who is so clearly at fault, you can choose to be patient and take responsibility for your emotional response to the situation. You make the choice of whether you buckle or call on patience to help you bear the burden of the situation. My teacher, Rabbi Perr, calls this awareness and exercise of choice “opening the space between the match and the fuse.”

– Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*

Food for thought:

When do you find it easiest to be patient? In what situations do you tend to become impatient? Are there any common triggers?

Is there anyone you owe an apology as a result of your impatience?

What would it take to “open the space between the match and the fuse?”

Notes:

Regret / Charata

From our sources:

Regret is one's doing something and then going back on it and wishing it had not been done. It is of great value in relation to repentance, for if one commits a sin and then regrets it, it is as if he had not sinned. And it is impossible to repent without regret...

[However, the] trait of inconstancy, of speaking of doing something today and regretting it tomorrow, of not abiding by what one has said – this is a trait that is very much scorned by others. It is indeed an evil trait for one to vow that he will fast, or give charity, or study Torah, and then regret it. And even though it is good to regret evil, it is better to make it unnecessary for oneself to change from custom to custom and from trait to trait. And this is the ideal – that one reflect and select for himself good customs and traits and accustom himself to them.

– *Ways of the Tzadikim (Anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

Food for thought:

Is there anything you regret as you consider the past year? How might that inform the process of repentance, or teshuva, you will undertake during the High Holy Days?

Do you find yourself frequently regretting commitments you have made? What changes would you need to make to make such regrets less frequent?

Notes:

Repentance / *Teshuvah*

From our sources:

Rabbi Eliezer said to his students, “Repent one day before you die.” His disciples said, “Who knows when we will die?” “All the more reason to do so,” he replied. Let us repent today, lest we die the day thereafter. The result will be that all our lives will be spent in repentance.

– *Avot de Rabbi Natan 15 (8th – 10th c.), trans. Borowitz & Schwartz, The Jewish Moral Virtues*

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha once asked his disciples: ‘In this day and age, when there are no prophets, how can we tell when a sin we have committed has been pardoned?’ They gave him various answers, none of which he found acceptable. ‘We can only tell,’ he said, ‘by the fact that we no longer commit the sin.’

– *Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, Book 2, The Later Masters, quoted in Borowitz & Schwartz*

Food for thought:

On Yom Kippur, we ritually rehearse our own death, refraining from eating, drinking, bathing, and other everyday activities. On that day, we repent as though it were the day before we were to die. For what will you seek forgiveness this Yom Kippur? For what would you ask forgiveness if you knew you would die tomorrow? And what will you need to do to be sure that you have truly “turned” and will not return to your former ways?

Notes:

Responsibility / Achrayut

From our sources:

The people of Israel are similar to a ship. If there is a hole in the lower hold, one does not say, 'Only the lower hold has a hole in it.' Rather they must immediately recognize that the ship is liable to sink and that they must repair the hole down below.

– *Tanna De Bei Eliyahu Rabbah* (10th c.) Chapter 11

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

– *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference*

Food for thought:

To whom and for whom are you responsible? How have you fulfilled that responsibility over the past year? What responsibilities (small or large) have you shirked?

Notes:

Silence / *Shtikah*

Like many things we think about, silence is dichotomous. . . . There is active silence—the art of quieting the clamor, of focused listening. Reverence is intentionally paying deep attention to the stillness that allows hearing the still, small voice whispering behind the curtain, the song of each heartbeat. Attention is the key to opening the doors of perception to the meaning inside the words. Quieting the monkey mind is like diving into the ocean, beneath the churning of waves, to the depths where luminescent creatures drift, unmoved by the tumult of tides. This I think, is the silence of love, of being held in the warm embrace of Presence. It is the stillness between heartbeats where life flows at our center; the clear pool that reflects the image of the Divine.

There is also passive silence, withholding words of comfort or condemnation, the silence of fear. It is the bleak frozen stillness of being exposed in a vast, windswept expanse of Absence. This is the silence that will not take the risk of taking a stand or make the effort of taking responsibility; the silence that does not speak out, implying consent and allowing the voice of evil to prevail. It is the silence of ego that prioritizes individual satisfaction over communal well-being; of pride, too busy and distracted to respond to the cries of a lonely hearts' longing; it is the self-protective, self-serving, self-determined silence that prefers safety and comfort over responsibility and engagement; it is the smug, self-satisfied silent treatment of power exerting control over compassion.

We have the right to remain silent and, sometimes, we have a moral duty to speak.

Silences, like words, are powerful. Like any power, it depends how we use it and our motivation for doing so.

– Vanessa Werthan (*posted at rebjamiembemussar.wordpress.com*)

Video of Rabbi Sharon Brous of IKAR: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04SAZ8OpWHo>

Food for thought:

Do you make time for silence? Do you find it challenging, or scary? When do you wish you had been silent this past year, and when should you have spoken out?

Notes:

Truth / Emet

From our sources:

Rebuke a wise person and he will love you.

– *Proverbs 9:18*

One should not be ashamed to accept the truth from anyone. Even if one is the smallest of the small and completely spurned, still accept the truth from him, for a precious pearl, even in the hands of the small and despised, is still a precious pearl.

– *The Ways of the Tzadikkim, “The Gate of Truth” (Anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

We are to offer our feedback to others only in a loving manner. Love is the secret ingredient that makes it possible to deliver criticism in a way that will allow it to be heard. . . .

As for the feedback we receive, we need it, and mostly we dislike getting it. We need it because we are all masters of self-deception, and so only feedback from others gives us a more accurate reading of the state of our [ethical traits] as others experience them. And we hate getting it because we are not humble. When someone tells us about a shortcoming or a way in which we have missed the mark, the ego springs to the defense. That is no strategy for growth.

– *Alan Morinis, With Heart in Mind*

Food for thought:

How open are you to hearing the truth about how others perceive you or your work? What stops you from seeking out this kind of “truth.”

How often do you provide truly loving rebuke to others to bring them closer to becoming their true, best selves?

Notes:

Trustworthiness / *Emunah*

From our sources:

If a man is not trustworthy about what he does, how can he be trusted when he attests to what others did?

– *Mishnah Demai 2:2, trans. Borowitz & Schwartz, The Jewish Moral Virtues, p. 29.*

Adonai, who may reside in your tent,
Who may dwell on Your holy mountain?
He who lives without blame,
Who does what is right,
And in his heart acknowledges the truth;
Who has no slander upon his tongue
Who has never done harm to his fellow,
Or borne reproach for [his acts toward] his neighbor;
For whom a contemptible man is abhorrent,
But who honors those who fear Adonai;
Who stands by his oath even to his own loss.
Who has never lent money at interest,
Or accepted a bribe against the innocent.
The man who acts thus shall never be shaken.

– Psalm 15

Food for thought:

To what extent have you earned the trust of others? To what extent do you live up to that trust? Have there been situations in which you have been less than trustworthy? Whose trust have you lost?

Notes:

Worry / De'aga

Like many traits, the trait of worry is neither wholly good nor bad, but can be problematic at the extremes. On one hand, if one is constantly “borrowing trouble” or fretting about things that may never come to be, he or she will miss out on their life. They will never be fully present, always worrying about the future. On the other hand, if one acts with no concern for the consequences of one’s actions, it can lead to disaster. On either extreme, one misses out on the joy and wisdom that come from conscious living. Our tradition teaches us that it is good to look back on our actions with a critical eye, and to be concerned about how our decisions will affect others. But it is also important to feel untainted joy in response to the life we have been given. The following texts illustrate this tension:

From our sources:

Worry and sorrow erode the heart . . . All the good resulting from joy is reversed in the case of worry.

– *The Ways of the Tzadikim, “The Gate of “Worry” (Anonymous, 15th c., Germany)*

If worry comes to your heart, take it as a warning from God who loves you. Examine your deeds and take counsel with those who advise you. When you have fulfilled God’s will, trust God and your serenity will return.

– *Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Satanov, Cheshbon ha-Nefesh.*

Food for thought:

What do you tend to worry most about? Does the worry prod you toward useful action? Or do you spin your wheels? Does worry get in the way of your experiencing your life in “real time”?

Notes: