



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Maintenance Required

There it was: the flashing symbol on the dashboard of my car: “MAINT REQD SOON.” This is not a message with an easy fix. It is not: “Passenger Door Open” or the very helpful: “Shift to P When Starting,” nor the succinct “KEY IS NOT DETECTED” when I forget to transfer my car key from one purse to the other.

No: “MAINT REQD SOON” is in an entirely different league: this vague but serious pronouncement alerts me that there is something I must do very soon to keep my car running....I must stop taking for granted that my car—which gets me to work and back, which transports me on numerous errands, and which in general makes my life in 21st century America possible—will continue to run in the same efficient fashion. I must act “soon,” lest I get the dreaded “MAINT REQD” message.

The engineers who designed my car understood that human beings are procrastinators. They built into our cars bells and whistles in the form of reminders, warning lights, and even a scary red symbol which consists of an exclamation point inside a circle—and which is accompanied by a buzzer—alerting us that we must attend to the maintenance of our cars. (FYI: if that scary red symbol appears on your dashboard, pull over immediately and contact your Toyota dealer).

Of course, no car is on the same maintenance schedule and car maintenance—even if we conscientiously do it at regular intervals—does not happen at the same time(s) every year.

Jewish tradition, however, does have a regularly scheduled time for maintenance of our most important resource: our lives. That time is Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah rouses us from procrastination, from our tendency to just drift along in life. Rosh Hashanah reminds us, in the words of Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, that “there are only two human tendencies—the desire to grow and to soar spiritually and the urge to take a long nap.”¹ The sound of the shofar, which we heard tonight and which we will hear tomorrow morning, wakes us up to the fact that we cannot just drift along, that we cannot take a long nap through the gift that is our life. Rosh Hashanah is the “MAINT REQD” alert for our souls. It reminds us of our ability and obligation to grow and change.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that our lives—unlike our cars, which will eventually wear out and which we can replace—are not replaceable. We only get one life (as far as we know), and we have to take care of it.

This rousing call to do preventative maintenance on our lives shakes our complacency. Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we are often stuck somewhere between chronic procrastination on the one hand, and a sense of all-or-nothingness on the other.²

¹ *Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit*, p. 32, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf. Leviathan Press, 2013.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

This spiritual and psychic no-man's land is illustrated by two well-known Jewish teachings.

The first, attributed to Rabbi Hillel, is: "Do not say, 'when I have leisure, then I will study,' because you may never have leisure."³

The second, attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, is: "You are not called upon to complete the work, yet you are not free to evade it."⁴

Rabbi Hillel's teaching "when I have leisure, then I will study" describes the procrastinator's view that both the present and the future are both equally good times to do what we hope to do. Hillel teaches us that— as much as we tell ourselves that we'll "get to it tomorrow"— tomorrow isn't guaranteed to any of us. The reality is that— while we can plan and hope and dream for the future— the time that we **do** have is in the present. Rosh Hashanah is the time to think seriously about how we will live and grow and embrace life, because we cannot know for certain how much life is in front of us.

Rabbi Tarfon's teaching: "You are not called upon to complete the work, yet you are not free to evade it" urges us not to be paralyzed because we are so focused on our ultimate goals that we feel powerless to achieve them. If we convince ourselves that our goals are so lofty that they are unattainable, we won't even try. Life, Rabbi Tarfon teaches us, is not an all or nothing proposition. We must begin— however small our steps—to act on what is really important to us.

Tonight I would like to invite all of us to reflect on what, in our own lives, needs maintenance. What have we let slide because we thought "I will get to it tomorrow?" What opportunities for change and growth have we let slip away because we feel powerless to attain them? What relationships have we let languish because we think we have time to repair them?

In order to allow ourselves the time and psychic space in which to begin (or continue!) our Rosh Hashanah maintenance, I'm going to suggest that we meditate on a few key questions. Please don't worry about remembering the questions: they will be on the [TRS website](#) and the TRS Facebook page, along with additional questions...you can look at them later.

I'd like to invite you to make yourselves comfortable in your seat. I'm going to offer some suggestions, and you can feel free to participate as fully, as minimally, or as temporarily as you like.⁵

I invite you to ask yourself if there is anything you can do to allow yourself to be just a bit more comfortable than you are now. Notice if any part of your body feels tense or uncomfortable. Make whatever change(s) you need in order to feel more comfortable. In addition, I invite you to imagine that you are even more comfortable than you are right now, that your body feels even more relaxed, even more fully balanced...as if for now there is a "time-out" from the cares and concerns and considerations of the outside world.

³ *Pirkei Avot* 2:5

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:21.

⁵ Adapted from: "Deborah Ross: Story Telling," "Ericksonian Hypnotherapeutic Group Inductions, and "8 Steps to Self-Hypnosis," by Joe Mallet, Ph.D.

I invite you to notice that, as you inhale, your shoulders tend to rise, and that—as you exhale—your shoulders lower...You might try exaggerating that exhalation and descent of your shoulders as you exhale. Let your shoulders come all the way down...let your breathing be very natural...allow yourself to be more fully aware of what it feels like to take each breath. Notice that, with each breath you take, and with each exhalation, there are different sensations. You might be aware that, as it enters your body, the air you breathe in cool in the back of your nose, in the back of your throat. You may notice that, as you breathe out, the air is warm....of course, it has been warmed by the very process of your life. Just notice that there may be areas of your body that feel more relaxed than they did just a few minutes ago.

If you feel comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes. If you are not comfortable closing your eyes, that is fine, too. If you would like to leave your eyes open, you might focus softly on a spot in front of you and just a bit above your eye level. By soft focus I mean looking without really trying to see anything at all.

Let yourself imagine a very relaxing experience, using all of your senses. Perhaps you are walking through a meadow, or maybe you are lying on the warm sand at your favorite beach. You are hearing the sounds of your special place: the sounds of the ocean, birds calling to one another. Imagine that, in this special place, there is a warm, relaxing feeling slowly spreading all the way from your head to your toes.

In this relaxed place, your inner mind has the time and space to consider some important questions, and to focus on the required maintenance of your soul.⁶

I invite you to ask yourself:

What brings you the most happiness in your life? How much time do you spend doing what brings you the most happiness? What are some things you can do to make more time for these things in the coming year?

What are the most important relationships in your life? During the last year, did these relationships become stronger and closer, or did they stagnate and drift? What can you do to nurture and strengthen these relationships during the New Year? If you have a relative or friend from whom you are estranged, what can you do to repair the breach?

What is the most important decision you made during the last year? What important decision did you avoid making during the last year? What, if you do not do it, will you most regret when next Rosh Hashanah arrives?

As you consider these important questions, you are allowing breath to follow breath...just like the waves of the ocean. You are connecting with that part of yourself that is your own personal sanctuary, where you can explore these questions, and where you can imagine yourself doing the soul and life maintenance that you need to do. It's almost like finding a secret garden, a place that has been inside you all along...you just forgot where the gate is. The answers to the questions that you found in the secret garden are there for you, whenever you wish. There is energy in this secret garden that allows

⁶ Adapted from *Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit*, pp. 21-22, 48-49, by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf. Leviathan Press, 2013.

answers to these and other questions to float up on their own...almost effortlessly. And you can return to this sanctuary, this secret garden, any time you wish. You have the strength and the ability to answer these questions and to act on the answers you find. **You** have the resources to make the great gift of your life what you want it to be.

When you are ready, let an inhalation open your eyes for you, or if your eyes have been in soft focus, gradually let your eyes refocus. Let your breath bring you back to this room, to this place. Notice how you have complete awareness of what is going on around you, but from a slightly different viewpoint. Almost as if you have reentered your body perfectly, but with just one fraction of a millimeter's difference from the way in which you inhabited your body before we began.

And from this different perspective, I invite you to take what you learned about yourself this evening, about what maintenance is required for your life and how you are going to make sure that this maintenance happens—how you are going to write this new awareness and knowledge into your Book of Life for the coming year.

Jewish tradition teaches that— during these sacred days— all of our deeds are inscribed in the Book of Life. Tonight, I would like to suggest that we look at the Book of Life as a notebook of the heart, a place where we can inscribe what kind of person we want to be, where we acknowledge that—like all human beings—we have gaps between who we are and who we want to be. We affirm, in our Book of Life—and in our hearts— that we have the ability to change.

Rabbi Laura Geller teaches:⁷

“Your Book of Life doesn’t begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people’s decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day—by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. *Shanah tovah* means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.”

May you have a good year, and a good change.

Shanah tovah.

⁷ Rabbi Laura Geller, in *Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh Hashanah*, p. 3. CCAR Press.