

For the last three years, I have collated and edited a series of reflections for the month of Elul. Those who subscribe to the UPJ's Elul Reflections receive a daily contemplative piece in their email boxes all through the month that precedes Rosh Hashanah. The aim is to give people a moment to reflect each day as the days tick down to the start of the High Holy Days. On Rosh Hodesh Av, which corresponded to July 28 this year, I sent out an email to my colleagues soliciting pieces of writing to include. As has happened for the last two years, the submissions came in very slowly. A trickle really. And when they finally started to arrive, something was wrong. They were dark. They were sad. They were lacking in the hopefulness which I feel is so emblematic of this time of year. The first to land in my inbox came from Rabbi Aviva Kipen in Melbourne. Here is an excerpt:

### **A SUKKAH OF PEACE FOR 5775**

The hollow box of concrete has been created with impact-resistant specifications.

*Adonai, me'on hayita lanu b'dor va'dor.*

*Eternal God, you have been our refuge*

*in all generations (Ps 90 Gates of Repentance 481 Yizkor)*

The door-sized opening will be covered by secure doors.

*Se'u she'arim roshei'khem, 'se'u pitkhei olam, veyavo  
Melekh hakavod.*

**Open up your heads you gates! Open up, O doors of  
forever, and let the Sovereign of glory enter. (Ps 24:7 GofR  
188)**

Small but sturdy eyelets stick out of the top, to enable the cranes that move it to raise and lower the little room into place. The structure looks a bit like a prefab *sukkah*. But it's not open on the sides or the top. Or

perhaps it is like the Holy of Holies; it only has one door, entered once a year.

**Three times the white-robed High Priest recites a confession of sins: for himself and his family, for the whole House of Aharon and for the whole House of Israel. (GofR 421-422)**

The sides do not give the appearance of flimsy panels. This hyper-strong structure is the opposite of a harvest *sukkah*. It protects those within, if they can get there in time.

*U'v'tzeil knfeikha tastireinu*

**Shield me beneath the shelter of your wings (Ps 17:8)**

What Rabbi Kipen has done here is to intersperse selections from liturgy with descriptions of portable bomb shelters. The United Israel Appeal ran a fundraising campaign in July to raise money to purchase portable bomb shelters for Israelis who did not have safe rooms in their homes or were out during a rocket attack.

My solicitation for Elul Reflections happened to correspond with the ground war in Gaza--one of the darkest times for Israel in a long time. There were other points of darkness around the world: rallies ostensibly to protest Israel's intervention in Gaza turned into anti-Semitic mobs. Jews were attacked in Paris, Miami and a Perth shopping centre. In Iraq, members of the so-called Islamic State was murdering those they considered non-believers, including many Muslims, and beheading western reporters. In Africa, the Ebola virus had begun to rage out of control. In the Ukraine, a plane was shot down and then left in the summer heat for weeks as militia members refused access to investigators and those who simply wanted to bury their dead.

It was, in short a dark time. A very dark time. I was thinking about my own Elul Reflections, and even I didn't know what to write. The High

Holy Days seemed so distant, and so too did the possibility that things could get better.

Before we dip our apples in honey, we recite the following words: May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that You renew this year for us and make it good and sweet. It seems to me that it is not a particularly hard ask to utter those words when the year that has past has been equally good and sweet. But when the previous year has been shockingly, heart-breakingly bad, what then? Then, I think it's helpful to turn back to the prayerbook and to the prayer we recite each morning after *Barchu: uvtuvo m'chadesh b'chol yom tamid ma'aesei breishit*. This means, more or less, in Your mercy You daily and always renew the work of creation. In its most radical reading, this prayer suggests that each morning when we awake, the world has been created anew. That tree that we see outside of our window is not, in fact, the same tree as yesterday but has been recreated, molecule by molecule, anew for this new day. It's an interesting idea, but scientifically preposterous.

Another, more realistic reading of the prayer is that each morning when we awake, we hope and pray that the world will be new for us. We will see the same tree as every other morning, but it will be as if we are seeing it for the first time. Each moment will hold something exciting in it, as the world unfolds before us. Here is a particularly lovely Hasidic interpretation of the prayer relating directly to the practice of prayer itself: "Unless we believe that God renews the word of creation each day, our prayers and observance of the commandments will grow old and accustomed and tedious. As the Psalmist says, "Cast me not off in the time of old age"--which can be read to mean "Do not let my world grow old." And in Lamentations we read "God's mercies are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." That the world is new to us every morning--that is God's great faithfulness!"

So this is a challenge we can set ourselves: to see the world as new every morning. Perhaps not every leaf on every tree, but at least something new. Many years ago, I wrote a sermon about taking a dog for a walk. If you have a dog, you know the experience of walking exactly the same route once or twice a day. And yet, your dog sees each outing as a completely new, endlessly exciting exercise. Could we find it within ourselves to experience the world that way?

If we can see each day as new, we can see this year as full of fresh possibilities rather than laden with looming fears. Tonight is therefore not simply the evening that follows today--tonight is brand new, bursting with promise and the hope for good things. If this last year has brought bad, why can't this next year bring good?

Which brings me back to the hopefulness of the High Holy Days. My Cheder students were surprised when I shared with them that Yom Kippur was one of my favourite days of the year. Not because I don't like eating, but because its message is so undeniably optimistic: we can remake ourselves. With will and drive and hard work, we can extract those aspects of our personalities which trouble us the most and leave a better self instead. We can do it.

Of all the Elul Reflections this year, my favourite was by Rabbi Nicole Roberts of North Shore Temple Emanuel. Here is what she wrote: "For our planet, it's been a traumatic year. Intractable violence has raged across the Middle East, Africa, and the Ukraine; millions have fled to foreign lands unable to adequately house and care for them; and the reports of human suffering have shaken us to our core. In the face of it all, we feel so helpless, so impotent. But the *yamim noraim* protest. They empower. They come to remind us that we still hold at least one very significant power that we must exercise: the power to change *ourselves*. This is not to say that these holidays are about so-called

“naval gazing” or turning our attention and intention inward *at the expense of* paying attention to the world’s deficiencies and problems. Only that in transforming ourselves and our ways, we can prove—to ourselves, to those around us, and to God—that *human change is possible*. The dramas unfolding on both the personal and the world stage *can* change course, because each human actor on those stages has the potential for personal transformation. Each of us can play a role in the proliferation of *hope*."

That is what this season brings with it: hope! Tonight we begin a new year--5775. May it be a year of sweetness, of good health, of abundance for all, of joy, of peace and, most of all, of hope. Shana tova!