

Imagine a Brand New World: Greeting the New Year

Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro, for the Jewish Ledger, September, 2017

What if you had never heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or James Taylor's song, "You've Got a Friend?" What if you had never tasted chocolate?

What would it be like to encounter the world as if it was brand new? What if your world was as fresh as the moment the sun rises to start the day?

I found myself asking these questions several weeks ago on a perfect Tanglewood morning. My wife and I were listening to the BSO rehearse Beethoven's Violin Concerto with Pinchas Zukerman performing. The setting couldn't have been more stunning. And what made it even more beautiful was the feeling that the audience, the grass, and the trees were all humming along with the famous melody of the piece.

It was delicious because it was so exquisite while also so familiar.

But then I wondered what it would be like to experience the concerto for the very first time. Would I love it as much? Would I love it even more?

What if you and I could all be gifted to capture the sense of awe and delight that comes with first experiences of all kinds?

What if we could live with eyes and ears so open that we always felt a sense of wonder at being alive?

It turns out that our Jewish New Year is all about this possibility. When we dip that crisp apple in the golden honey, we're meant to taste it as if we've never had the luxury of sweetness in our lives. When we hear the shofar, we're told it's meant to be so surprising that it forces us to listen even more closely to the underlying glory of life.

I know we've been here before. Many of us have prayed the words 20 if not 50 times or more. But the goal is to use the season for renewing our appreciation that we are alive. The goal is to read the prayers as if they were brand new. The hope is to come to believe that new days really do lie before us. New melodies and experiences are available.

Abraham Joshua Heschel offers these words on the cusp of our New Year. He writes, "*To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings...Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.*"

Israeli poet, Leah Goldberg, inspires me with her own prayer. May I suggest you copy the words and carry them with you during the next few weeks. Let them be as new and fresh as the upcoming season. Shana Tova.

Teach us, o God, to praise and to pray.

For the mystery of the withering leaf,

For the glow of the ripened fruit,

For the freedom to see, to feel,

To breathe, to know, to hope, to stumble.

Teach our lips a blessing, a hymn of praise,

As you renew each morning and each night.

Lest this day (or year) appear as yesterday

And the day before.

*Lest our days became routine.
Lest our souls be blind to wonder.*