



PARDES HANNAH

פרדס חנה

The Jewish Renewal Community of Ann Arbor
www.pardeshannah.org

Our approach, rooted in neo-Hasidism and egalitarianism, stresses spiritual practices that open the heart, and which weave together embodied practice, traditional *davvenen*, chant and meditation, study, and heartfelt sharing. Our spiritual approach for this season combines the notion of **working on the self (refining our spiritual-ethical qualities) and going beyond the small self**, so that we also become part of a much larger, mysterious web of Life. As Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi taught, “[we] see ourselves as cells of the living earth.” To use a key Hasidic metaphor, the period leading up to and including the Days of Awe is like a mikveh (or healing bath) in Time, a way of immersing ourselves in the River of Possibility.

This dedicated time allows us to explore a more fluid, self-reflective, and loving way of living. This requires both Will (intentionality and focus) and Willingness (a kind of flexibility and curiosity) to reflect on and recalibrate our relationships and patterns. We do this through hevruta/spiritual friendship and check-ins, as well as through *heshbon nefesh* (self-accounting). We do this through communal prayer and sharing where we each challenge, support and spark the other; by chanting (singing our hearts out); con-spiring (breathing/meditating together, even on Zoom!); and by celebrating moments of joy and radical amazement. Heschel calls this living your life “as though it were a work of art.” These are practices that we can integrate into our daily lives—into our social, political, intellectual, ecological and artistic engagements.

For example, one of the themes for Rosh ha-Shanah is Renewal. It is a Deep Cleanse, a time to remove the “shmutz” or dust from our hearts, to re-inscribe the divine name or the phrase “*Le-Hayyim*,” “To Life,” in our hearts. (A Jewish tattoo!) It is a time to recommit to both *tikkun ha-neshama* (restoring our souls) and *tikkun ha-olam*, helping to heal the body politic and the planet in ways both small and large/systemic, knowing that both *neshama*/soul-breath and *olam*/world are intertwined.

Turning to Yom Kippur, part of the work of this day is to more fully acknowledge our shadow side and missteps—toward ourselves, our intimates and communities, toward the planet, and vis-à-vis the divine. To open to and become worthy of forgiveness, we who are imperfect beings. Perhaps more edgily, we at Pardes Hannah allow ourselves to be challenged and inspired by the kabbalistic teaching that our prayers and longing are for the sake of *Binyan Malkhut*, the rebuilding of the divine *partzuf* or interface—the manifestation of Shekhinah in our world. The mystics teach that the divine interface has also become frayed and depleted over the ensuing year. (God too aches!) We are invited to become partners with the divine in that energetic renewal and to help create a spiritual foundation for the year that is aborning. On Yom Kippur, we both figuratively and literally go deep inside, standing both alone and deeply together, bonded to other Jews, but also to all sentient beings, over the arc of 26 hours. When we flow back out into the world—a world that so needs healing—and resume our eating, consuming, producing, parenting, friending, and the flurry of our daily routine, we hope to do so with greater skill, courage, generosity (*hesed*), and purpose. Eyes open, heart open. Ready to work and to experiment together.

Our spiritual toolkit draws deeply from the layers of Jewish tradition: its teachings and practices, its shofar blasts, metaphors and puns, prayers and songs. But *torah hadasha me-itti tetze* (ff, Isa. 51:4), we are also committed to “drawing forth new Torah,” an egalitarian, inclusive, earth-sensitive Torah that responds to the press of this moment. Ours is a time of pandemic and economic stress, of existential fear and not-knowing. It is a time in which the simple act of hugging a loved one may be freighted, but also the time for national reckonings on race, social justice, and income inequality. A moment when new possibilities are being born.

How do we nurture these themes in our High Holiday community so that they can better permeate our lives? We begin with prayer, with embodied, sung, and contemplative practices that help us access our deepest knowing

and not-knowing; by contributing the food we don't eat (by our fasting) to local food pantries, as a down payment for ongoing *tzedakah*—the more just distribution of resources; by wrestling with Torah and through the Torah-vort (or brief teachings) that community members share with those assembled. What wisdom pours out, fashioned from sacred texts and the stuff of people's lives! How our hearts open to each other, as we see and are seen! Each year at Pardes Hannah, we select a theme to help guide us through the Days of Awe. This year's theme is **"Stand Where You Are and Serve with Love."** It comes from a Hasidic teaching (*Tzava'at ha-RiVaSH*), which reads:

There are times when you are not at prayer, but nevertheless can feel close to God. Your mind can ascend above the heavens. And there are also times, in the very midst of prayer, when you find yourself unable to ascend. At such times, **stand where you are and serve with love.**

Stand where you are and serve with love! On one level, this teaching captures the unpredictability of life, never knowing when a life-altering insight will break through, or our words catch fire. The second paragraph acknowledges those moments of disappointment, when our prayers don't take wing but lie lifeless on the ground. At such times, our teaching implies, acknowledge where you truly stand and be with the pain, the loneliness, the not-knowing. From that honest place, you can flow out in loving service: to others, to our communities, our people, our planet, and to the divine. In that gesture of loving service, something may shift. Awakening may yet happen; new possibilities and nodes of connection may be discovered or birthed. Even in lowly moments (and sometimes *especially* in them) we can build real relationships and promote healing. The teaching also suggests that even when we cannot freely move, amid social distancing, new-old treasures can be found and shared. "Stand where you are and serve. With love. And—our teaching adds—with awe."

In this liminal time (and what are the Days of Awe if not liminal, betwixt and between, *nisht ahin un nisht aher?*), we can open the gates of our imagination. We can internalize Torah that heals. We can let the Shekhinah in, and begin to co-create better, more holy, more loving ways of being.

Kotveinu le-Hayyim, May the word "To Life" be inscribed in our hearts! *Le-shanah tovah*, may this be a good year.

Rabbi Elliot Ginsburg

P.S. The new Hebrew year is 5781/ תשפ"א (TaShP"A). I like to read its letters rebus-like as 'א ףתש, S —SHaTePh A(leph)—a mnemonic, reminding us first, *shatef*, to partner/create coalitions for the sake of Aleph (the main thing), i.e., to work for what *really matters*; and second, *le-shatef im*, to *partner with*, the divine Aleph—to become partners with the Holy One in the renewal of this, our precious world.

Rabbi Elliot Ginsburg