

When Reflection is a Gift and Not a Burden: OCD, Autism, and Seeing Rosh Hashanah Through New Eyes

By Nasiyah Isra-UI

Disability Torah Project, www.disabilitytorahproject.org

For most people, Rosh Hashanah is a time of celebration, good food, and seeing friends and family. But Rosh Hashanah is more than simply a Jewish New Year. It is a point in the Jewish calendar when the opportunity for a connection with ourselves and God peaks.

During the month of Elul, we take time for reflection on the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah. It's a time of forgiveness, soul-searching, and fostering reconnection with others and ourselves. We think about wrongdoing, mistakes, and opportunities for repair. We think about *teshuvah* and becoming a better version of ourselves. We reflect on how we've shown up in the world and think about ways to be better next year. Then, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have the Days of Awe, serving as an amplified version of what we did during the month of Elul.

Honestly, sometimes it feels like TOO MUCH time for reflection.

As an autistic person who also struggles with scrupulosity and relationship OCD (amongst others), this entire season can feel especially heavy. I'm already assessing my actions, evaluating my responses, thinking about my relationships with others, and replaying events and interactions in my head on a daily basis. I

don't need Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Days of Awe, or Yom Kippur for that. But if I don't participate in this moment, I will miss out on a powerful opportunity to fortify my connection with God and connect with a longstanding cultural tradition.

So how do I keep myself from turning what should be a wonderful moment of renewal into a field day for self-deprecating memories, rumination, and spirals of intrusive thoughts? That's what I decided to figure out.

1. A Call to a Fresh Start

Lots of people phrase the shofar blast (the major mitzvah of the holy day) as the final call to repentance. And while that is true, it's not the only meaning behind the shofar. It also represents the human voice, [the wordless call to God crying out from the depths of our soul](#) for renewal and connection – and the messianic era.

The Messianic Age means different things for different people, but it almost universally symbolizes *redemption*. A moment where nothing else matters but us and God. A moment where joy and grief mix to create the bittersweet. A moment where God meets us right where we are, no questions asked. The shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah remind us that this moment is ours to make what we will of it, and it's up to us to usher it in.

I don't need to have every answer to cry out to God, and it is okay to celebrate and grieve at the same time. To struggle and find joy is what the shofar sound embodies. A moment of calm in a brain that is constantly on fire.

The blowing of the shofar reminds me that it is never too late to start anew. It is never too late to call out to God in the midst of

the wilderness. God grieves with me, celebrates with me, and sits silent with me. Like the blasts of the shofar, my life is mixed with joy and pain, sorrow and hope. *Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah, Tekiah Gedolah* — they all represent moments in my reflective journey where I felt something deep, heavy, and difficult, and God carried it with me.

2. Joy in the Impermanence

[Rebbe Nachman of Breslov](#) taught that there is a major distinction to be made between sadness (self-loathing or being overly self-critical) and a broken heart. I interpret this to mean that there is a time and place for self-assessment, growth, apologies, feeling sorry for wrongdoing, and reflection, but too much time spent in such endeavors with no break will only lead to weighty sadness and low self-esteem.

The Rebbe surmised that this ever-enveloping sadness connected back to the *Yetzer Hara* (the Evil Inclination), which is contrary to Hashem, because it encourages us to spend our entire day feeling angry and disappointed in ourselves. It is then easy for us to lose faith in ourselves and dampen our willpower to do good in the world. So a person should set aside moments in their day where they leave behind the negative thoughts and self-criticism and focus on joy.

Life is imperfect and has its ups and downs. It's our job to find joy in the impermanence anyway. Hold two truths side by side, and honor both as aspects of being human.

This is one of the many reasons why ruminating and self-loathing can get in the way of the real purpose of reflection during the season of Rosh Hashanah. It is okay to recognize when my *teshuvah* is turning into compulsions and rumination

and pause. *Teshuvah* is about making amends, restoring relationships, and feeling at peace with my decisions. It is okay to say, “I think I have done all I can, and I will do something else that brings me joy now.” Knowing when to stop and look for joy in these reflective moments is responsible and safe for my brain and body. And that is okay.

3. Imperfection is Part of the Plot

Imperfection is a part of our people’s story. It always has been. We carried the fractured tablets alongside the new ones in the Ark of the Covenant. Jacob returned to Canaan triumphant, but with a hip injury from wrestling with his past. Moses freed our people while navigating the insecurities of a speech impediment. Their imperfections and challenges were not hidden, locked away, or weaponized against them. Time and time again, God used those who showed up with baggage, imperfections, past trauma, and their own struggles, and He said, “You still have a purpose.”

I struggle daily to practice unlearning the compulsions my brain created to protect itself. I ruminate often. I frequently feel bad about decisions I made and impulses I couldn’t control, second-guessing relationships and feelings because I want to be 100% sure I’m making the “right” choice. Oftentimes, my brain tries to convince me I’m a bad person because I can’t predict every variable for every decision. But there is no “perfect” choice. There is no one person on earth who can navigate life with 100% accuracy. That was never the point.

Instead, I can learn to see the beauty in the imperfect. I can lead with love instead of fear. I can look back on my life and say, “I did the best I could,” while also acknowledging that new experiences provide me with new ways to become a better

version of myself. I can strive to improve myself without obsessing over every detail of what that means. I can celebrate my wins, even when I know that I've got a long journey ahead. That's really what Rosh Hashanah is all about.

Conclusion

Reflection during this season is not about fixing every flaw, mending every broken thread, or perfecting every imperfection in my life. It's about showing up, repairing things I've broken, and having the humility to leave the rest with God. It's not up to me to save the world or be the very best at everything.

Life is messy and complicated, and Rosh Hashanah reminds us that the solemn can mix with the sweet. We may not have all the answers, and maybe we never will, but I can use this time to forgive myself for all the times I've complicated *teshuvah* and to sit with the fact that being imperfect is okay, and I can find joy in the ordinary. God didn't ask me to be perfect; He simply asked that I try my best to repair what's broken and grow closer to Him with every step – no matter how big or small that step may be. *Shanah Tovah U'metukah!*

Nasiyah Isra-UI, B.S., (they/she) is a multiply-disabled educator, author, poet, lecturer, rabbinical student, and public policy professional working at the intersection of education reform and disability justice. They are the Director of the Mishpacha Rising Collective and a content creator. Nasiyah enjoys using their writing to share passionate experiences of

self-discovery, raise awareness about intersectionality within the Jewish world, and foster inclusive spaces of belonging where people of all abilities and backgrounds can learn, grow, and flourish. In their free time, Nasiyah enjoys traveling, cooking, business mentorship, writing and recording songs, leading tefillah and Torah study in their local community, and teaching the art of expressive writing.