

# Newness in Autumn

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## Understanding Risk

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חָדָשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֶה לְגִגְגְּךָ  
וְלֹא-תָשִׂים דָּמַיִם בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי-יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל  
מִמֶּנּוּ:

Deuteronomy 22:8

The All Knowing One understands both things that are and things that have the potential to become -- hence, the legal requirements to build a parapet for the roof of your house and not to leave a rickety ladder standing.

Maimonides (1135-1204, Spain and Egypt), *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book III 20:3

## A Matter of Life and Death

The High Holy Days meet the challenge of mortality by harnessing death into a force for life.

By tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the “birthday” of the world or of humanity. And whatever is born, dies. Ten days after Rosh Hashanah, on Yom Kippur, Jews enact death by denying themselves the normal human pleasures. During the Days of Awe, we wonder, “Who shall live and who shall die?” and pray that God will inscribe us in the Book of Life.

[This ten-day journey from birth to death] is not a morbid experience, however, because this encounter with death is in the service of life. The true goal is a new appreciation of life. To know how fragile the shell of life is, is to learn and handle it with true grace and delicacy. Only one who realizes the vulnerability of loved ones can treasure every moment with them. The encounter with death turns the individual toward life. Death can only be opposed by life, just as death-in-life (stagnation) can only be opposed by growing in life. Instead of standing there, letting death constantly invade life, Judaism strikes back by raiding the realm of death and turning this encounter into a spur to life.

Irving Greenberg (b. 1933, New York), *The Jewish Way*, pp. 185-6

### **“Coming Up on September”**

White butterflies, with single black fingerpaint eyes on their wings dart and settle, eddy and mate over the green tangle of vines in Labor Day morning steam.

The year grinds into ripeness and rot, grapes darkening, pears yellowing, the first Virginia creeper twining crimson, the grasses, dry straw to burn.

The New Year rises, beckoning across the umbrellas on the sand. I begin to reconsider my life. What is the yield of my impatience? What is the fruit of my resolve?

I turn from frantic white dance over the jungle of productivity and slowly a *niggun* slides, cold water down my throat. I rest on a leaf spotted red.

Now is the time to let the mind search backwards like the raven loosed to see what can feed us. Now, the time to cast the mind forward to chart an aerial map of the months.

The New Year is a great door that stands across the evening and Yom Kippur is the second door. Between them are song and silence, stone and clay pot to be filled from within myself.

I will find there both ripeness and rot, what I have done and undone, what I must let go with the waning days and what I must take in. With the last tomatoes, we harvest the fruit of our lives.

Marge Piercy (b. 1936, Detroit)