

Preparation is the Key

If you want to enjoy a nice vacation away from home, you probably need to make some preparations. There's choosing the right destination, reserving a good hotel, making certain your airline flights are accurate, ascertaining that basic health care facilities are located nearby, packing a few changes of clothing, and other relevant activities, as well. Of course, the possibility of jumping in a car, and simply leaving home for unknown destinations can also be a way of vacationing, but, you're risking a lot. If it works out, great. But, there are many ways such vacations can go wrong.

What's true of vacations is even more true of career. Most people try to plan out an educational path that will direct them towards a goal. Trying to become successful in any endeavor simply by trusting luck may work for a few people. But for the majority, it takes hard work, specific educational training, and dedication to a perceived goal. Over time, we develop an inner sense of what is required to be successful in our chosen profession.

That's also true of our inner spiritual lives. It takes hard work and dedication to move forward spiritually. That truth really hits home during the High Holidays. Extracting just a few minutes of spiritual uplift during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can be difficult. Even rabbis have to work at it. Our tradition recognizes this difficulty, and advises that, if you want to really feel spiritually connected, it's risky to arrive at the High Holidays without prior preparation.

That's why preparations for the *Yamim Noraim* begin 30 days before Rosh Hashanah. After every morning service (with the exception of Shabbat), we sound the shofar. The sound is designed to wake us up; not from real sleep, but from spiritual lethargy. It gives us a month's notice - on a daily basis- that today would be a good day to reawaken spiritual connections. Perhaps that means placing a dollar in the synagogue charity box. Perhaps that means returning to a Jewish practice that you have let slip over the year. Or, perhaps it means learning something Jewish through [Judaism 101](#) online. It could also mean making plans during the 30 days prior to Rosh Hashanah for a

trip to Israel in the coming year. Activities which focus our attention on Jewish living are a great way to prepare ourselves for the spiritual return which the High holidays ask of us.

There is another well-established practice of reciting certain prayers, called *selichot*, during this 30 day time period. While generally maintained in Sephardic communities, this practice can be adapted to Ashkenazic Jewish circles as well. There are books available to help prepare us for the “Days of Awe”.

Here are just three suggestions:

Meditations for the Days of Awe by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins

Enter These Gates by Alden Solovy

This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation by Rabbi Allen Lew (z.l.) (By the way, Rabbi Lew, may his memory be a blessing, was a friend of mine, who combined principles of Zen Buddhism with Jewish practice. He had a fascinating personality).

This is just a sampling of the books and resources available to help us prepare for the High Holidays. There are so many opportunities to use the waning days of summer to build up our spiritual resources for the new year. After two years of difficult times for Jews around the world, this Elul would be a good time to recharge our spiritual batteries. I know I need it. I’m guessing you do, as well. Feel free to contact me about your spiritual preparations for the new year. Maybe together, we can help each other experience a “spiritual high” that every Jew deserves.

Shanah Tovah from my home to yours.

Rabbi Seth Sternstein