

Cheshbon HaNefesh: Communal Spiritual Accounting
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5785/2024

I've recently finished my first year as your rabbi. As we know, this new year ahead has the potential to bring a lot of changes to our community. And I'd like to offer some thoughts that could help us look ahead to 5785 with a new sense of grounding and connection.

I was looking for a way to express the kind of process I have in mind. And sometimes I stumble upon a really great quote at just the right moment. You know the kind of quote I mean, right? Something that resonates deeply with you at that moment when you most need it?

A few weeks ago, when I was beginning to think about how I wanted to prepare myself for the High Holidays, I discovered this gem.

Maya Angelou is quoted as saying,

"I have great respect for the past. If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going. I have respect for the past, but I'm a person of the moment. I'm here, and I do my best to be completely centered at the place I'm at, then I go forward to the next place."

Angelou's words remind me of the process of Cheshbon haNefesh, literally, "spiritual accounting." We engage in this process in the month leading up to the High Holidays and during the time from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur.

One month ago, I wrote in my weekly clergy message about starting my own experience of Cheshbon haNefesh. Back in rabbinical school, our teachers encouraged us to try out different ways to reflect in the month leading up to the High Holidays, and I never really found something that spoke to me back then. This year,

I wanted to revisit approaches to Cheshbon haNefesh as a way to connect more meaningfully to the holidays.

I grounded my practice in a process first described by Menachem Mendel Leffin, a late 18th/early 19th century Jewish enlightenment thinker. In his book, also called *Cheshbon haNefesh*, he listed 13 traits to observe and reflect upon for the sake of self-improvement. Since I only had four weeks in the month leading up to the High Holidays, I decided to choose four qualities where I felt I had some work to do. As an example, for the first week of self-reflection, I focused on the trait of patience. I wrote a short sentence to describe an ideal version of patience.

“Whatever may obstruct me from reaching my goals, it is possible to bear the burden of the situation. When I choose to respond with patience, I can be open to the lessons and growth from the situation.” I thought about times in the past when I had been impatient as well as my ongoing struggles with patience. Over the course of that week, I noticed how often situations required patience, and when it was easier or more difficult for me to have it, myself.

This process had me look at my past—I chose qualities to observe based on what I considered my growing edges. BUT the week I spent on each quality was focused very much in the present moment. By the end of each week, I had a better understanding of where I had been and where I was with respect to each trait, and I felt more prepared to engage with the next one, to “go forward to the next place,” in Angelou’s words.

During my month of Cheshbon haNefesh, I also thought about the meaning of the word “cheshbon,” what I’ve been calling “accounting.” The Hebrew root for this word is chet.shin.bet. This root also gives us the words “chashiva,” thinking, and “chashuv,” important. I wondered about the connection between “accounting” and “thinking” and “importance.” Then I remembered a concept I learned about in my undergraduate business school.

When a company is producing its financial statements for the public, it must provide all relevant and necessary information so that the public can understand the company’s financial health. The company is not required to share **every** piece of available information but needs to disclose any information that could have a material impact on the company’s financial position.

In other words, when a company is creating its financial reports, it needs to **THINK** – chashiva – about what information is **IMPORTANT** – chashuv – in order to give an adequate **ACCOUNTING** – cheshbon – of the company’s operations. This information not only helps potential investors, but it also helps the company plan its next steps into the future. To go back to Maya Angelou, the company needs to know where it has come from to know where it is going, and it needs to be grounded in the present moment.

Cheshbon HaNefesh is not simply a recollection of historical data or a report on what you do or is happening to you now. It’s not simply saying “I was born on this day, started school at this age, graduated HS in this year, and so forth.” And it isn’t just “Now I live in this town and do this kind of work.” Rather, **spiritual** accounting

requires you to recognize how those historical moments, how these life experiences have each played a part in shaping your values, your perspective, and you as a whole.

To continue the analogy to financial accounting, one records the significant transactions, the ones which actually have an impact on the bottom line. It is the same for spiritual accounting. Which experiences have mattered? Which have been formative? Which have reflected something essential about you?

Much like financial accounting for businesses, the process of Cheshbon haNefesh is not **only** for individual people. Groups of people can engage in spiritual accounting together, and organizations can use the framework of Cheshbon haNefesh to find clarity for their next steps. This has special meaning for our community as we enter this new year together.

Temple Emanu-El can, and dare I say **should**, do its own Cheshbon haNefesh; a process which would do us a lot of spiritual good. In Maya Angelou's language, we have a lot of respect for the past. And now we need to know where we are so that we can "go forward to the next place." We have a responsibility to determine who we have been and acknowledge who we are now. This process will help us decide what we want for our future and how we want to move forward to achieve it.

Reflecting on Temple Emanu-El's history is only one piece of our congregation's spiritual accounting. Engaging in Cheshbon haNefesh can be understood as a combination of looking in a mirror and looking through old

photographs. Old photographs remind us of our past while a mirror gives us a different perspective of ourselves in the present.

Thinking about what has been important in Temple Emanu-El's past is like looking at old photographs. One of the highlights of my first year with you has been learning about the congregation's history. I invite you to continue sharing with me your memories of where Temple Emanu-El has been over the years. People usually remember what they think is important. Your memories and stories say something about what you have valued about the congregation and what you think are the essential elements of Temple Emanu-El.

We also need to take a long close look at ourselves in the mirror. Who is Temple Emanu-El today? Who are the people who make up this community? What aspects of Temple Emanu-El are you **currently** proud of? What do you appreciate about the congregation now? What are the strengths of our congregation? What blemishes and areas for improvement or growth do you see when you're looking closely at this sacred community?

Just as each of us have different memories of Temple Emanu-El, each of us will see different reflections in the mirror. When our Israelite ancestors stood at Mount Sinai and received Torah, the midrash¹ teaches us God's voice came forth such that everyone heard God's teachings according to their capacity, in a unique way. When I stand in front of a mirror with another person, how I perceive my reflection is different from how the other person sees me. Some features catch my

¹ Sh'mot Rabbah 5:9

attention while others which I don't notice may be exactly what draws the other person's attention.

And so it is with looking in the mirror at Temple Emanu-El. Different aspects of the community will stand out to different people. We can get a more complete picture of the congregation when we share what we notice about it. Just like sharing memories helps all of us understand where the community came from and where it has been, describing to each other how we see the congregation today helps all of us understand who Temple Emanu-El is, what aspects are important to us, what values guide us, and where we see potential for improvement and growth.

Today, on Rosh HaShanah, we stand together in the doorway to the year 5785. As with all doorways, we can look at our past and get a glimpse of our possible futures. We do not rush through that doorway but we linger on the threshold to take stock of who we have been as individuals and to remember Temple Emanu-El's role in your life. We take notice of ourselves now, and we acknowledge who Temple Emanu-El is at this moment in time.

Like diligent accountants, we pay attention to the experiences which have shaped us. We recount what has formed and nurtured this congregation. We retell those experiences which have had a material impact, those which have created our sense of self, our souls, and those which have crafted the spirit of our sacred community.

Our individual and collective Cheshbon haNefesh takes us on a journey through our past to the present moment. Our recollections and observations ground

us through a fuller understanding of ourselves. Yet the process itself can feel daunting, and even Menachem Mendel Leffin – that man who wrote a book on the subject – suggests engaging in this work with a partner.

When I first started my personal Cheshbon haNefesh this year, I told a few close friends and my family what I was up to. I also made the choice to share my experience with you in each of my weekly messages during the month leading up to these High Holidays. Not only did sharing my experience keep me accountable to stick with it, but it also gave me different outlets to process what I observed. During my week of focusing on patience, my family members would point out when I was expressing impatience or when my “patience muscles” were being exercised. These mostly gentle reminders helped me to understand what was really behind my impatience and what enabled me to demonstrate more patience. In short, I was able to understand myself far better by sharing my process with others.

We as a Temple Emanu-El community also can engage with Cheshbon haNefesh in loving partnership. After the festival season, starting in November, I will offer a Cheshbon haNefesh check-in hour here at the temple after religious school on Sunday mornings and at 1:00 on Tuesday afternoons. If these times do not work for your schedule, I invite you to call or email me to set up a mutually convenient time.

Each week, we will meet in Starensier over coffee and tea, perhaps with a light snack, and I will ask you to share stories about your experiences at Temple Emanu-El. I will listen to how those experiences shaped your relationship with the

congregation and how they affected your life more broadly. Come as often as you like or feel able, whether that is only one time or once a month or every week.

We as a community are considering many possible transitions in the year ahead. I've discussed this with Jenn, and she agrees this process will be useful for our congregation. It is our hope that, by looking in the mirror and sharing old photographs together, we will be better equipped to engage with this important, ongoing process.

In this new year of 5785, may it be that our reflections on our formative experiences at Temple Emanu-El bring us clarity—a better sense of who we are, where the congregation has come from, what matters most to our community, and what we hope to take with us— as we, in Angelou's words, "go forward to the next place."