

Once upon a time, there was a poor man named Reb Isaac who lived in Krakow, Poland. For several nights in a row, Reb Isaac had the same dream. A voice told him that if he traveled all the way to Prague, he would find a great treasure buried beneath a bridge near the royal palace.

Now, most of us have strange dreams and manage to move on with our lives. We wake up, think, “Well, that was weird,” check our phones, have some coffee, and never think about it again. Reb Isaac apparently had a little more faith in his subconscious. The dream came back again. And again. Every night, the same message: Go to Prague. Find the bridge. There you will discover a treasure.

Eventually, Reb Isaac decided he had to go. So he packed his things and set out on the long journey from Krakow to Prague. When he finally arrived, he found the bridge exactly as it had appeared in his dream. There was just one problem: the bridge was heavily guarded.

For several days, Reb Isaac wandered around the bridge, trying to figure out how he could start digging underneath it without attracting too much attention..

Eventually, one of the guards noticed him. “What are you doing here every day?” the guard demanded. Reb Isaac was embarrassed, but finally he told the guard the truth. He explained that he had dreamed there was treasure buried beneath this bridge.

The guard burst out laughing.

“You traveled all the way here because of a dream? If I listened to my dreams, I would be in Krakow right now! I keep dreaming that there is treasure buried beneath the stove in the home of some Jew named Isaac.”

Reb Isaac said nothing.

He turned around, traveled all the way back to Krakow, walked into his own home, dug beneath his stove—and found the treasure.

In many ways, the story of Reb Isaac is similar to the experience each of us begins tonight. From Erev Rosh Hashanah through Neilah ten days from now, the High Holy Days invite us to go on a spiritual journey in pursuit of a treasure of fulfillment and meaning.

We come to services. We pray from a machzor filled with ancient prayers. We hear the shofar. We reflect. Over these next ten days, we will move from Rosh Hashanah through the Ten Days of Repentance until we arrive at Yom Kippur.

And yet the real journey of the High Holy Days is not from one place to another. It’s the journey inward, in which we will ultimately discover that the destination is ourselves.

Rabbi Alan Lew captures this concept beautifully in his book *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. Lew’s central message is that the HHD journey requires us to do something that sounds simple but is surprisingly difficult:

To evaluate our lives with honesty and integrity.

Not the lives we intended to live. Not the lives we present to everyone else or post about online. Not the lives we tell ourselves we will begin living someday. But the lives we are actually living right now.

That is the work traditionally called *heshbon hanefesh*—an accounting of the soul.

The phrase comes from the world of business. A *heshbon* is an accounting, a reckoning, a balancing of the books. And there is something wonderfully practical about that image. At the end of a fiscal year, a business cannot simply say, “We had good intentions.” It has to open the books. What came in? What went out? Where did we succeed? Where did we fall short? Where did we invest wisely? Where did we waste resources? What needs to change next year?

The High Holy Days invite us to conduct the same audit—not of our finances, but of our souls.

How did I spend my time this year? Where did I allocate my emotional energy? Who received the best of me? And who received only what was left over? What did I say mattered most to me?

And if someone looked only at my calendar, my attention, and my behavior, would they come to the same conclusion?

Those questions are uncomfortable. Which is probably why we spend so much of the year avoiding them. Lew writes about our instinct to run away from the places in our lives that frighten us. We distract ourselves. We keep moving. We tell ourselves we will deal with things later.

And then the Jewish calendar interrupts us. The shofar sounds. And in effect it says: Stop!

Wake up. Look. Examine your life.

Not for the sake of self-flagellation. Not so we feel guilty or bad about ourselves. But for the sake of self-empowerment.

Because the purpose of taking stock is to make change possible. If I realize that I haven't been present enough with someone I love, then I can become more present. If I realize that I've held onto a resentment for too long, I can begin to release it. If I recognize that ambition, fear, distraction, or ego has taken up too much space in my life, I can begin to reorder my priorities.

And perhaps most importantly, if I realize that there are things I have been postponing—conversations I need to have, apologies I need to make, risks I need to take, people I need to appreciate—I can stop pretending there will always be another year.

This is one of the great spiritual truths at the heart of Alan Lew's book: awareness of our mortality makes life more vivid. The High Holy Days remind us that life is fragile precisely so that we might become more awake to its possibilities.

Which brings us back to Reb Isaac.

He travels hundreds of miles searching for something that ultimately turns out to have been beneath his feet all along.

But here is the part of the story that I find most profound:

He still had to make the journey.

Technically, the treasure had always been sitting beneath his stove.

But without Prague, without the bridge, without the long road and the strange encounter with the guard, Reb Isaac never would have found it.

Sometimes we need to travel very far in order to see what has been right in front of us the whole time.

And perhaps that's what these days are for. [long pause]

To guide us on this journey, I will be centering my sermons throughout the Yamim Noraim around a common theme. Every few years, there is a movie that captures the public's attention. That becomes the center of our cultural focus. This year, the movie that everyone's been talking about is Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*. Nolan's adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* stoked controversy for his casting and editorial choices, yet became a blockbuster, breaking box office records.

Throughout these High Holy Days I will be connecting elements from *The Odyssey* with broader remarks. Tomorrow morning, I will draw upon Odysseus' sense of alienation and displacement upon his return to Ithaca as a frame for our current epidemic of antisemitism—how we respond when the place we long called our home no longer feels like home. On Day 2 of Rosh Hashanah, I will talk about human potential and holiness by exploring similarities and differences between the notion of Zeus' Law in the *Odyssey*, the concept of *Tzelem Elohim* in the Torah, and the Declaration of

Independence's articulation of inalienable rights. On Kol Nidrei, we will take an intermission from The Odyssey—which, given its length, might have been a good idea for Nolen to consider— as I speak about the role of affirmation in helping us accomplish the work of *heshbon ha-nefesh*. Finally, on Yom Kippur, I will return to The Odyssey to discuss who we want to be when we return home.

Over the next ten days, we will journey through some of Judaism's most powerful rituals. We will hear the piercing call of the shofar. We will be haunted by the words and melody of *Unetaneh Tokef*. We will confess together on Yom Kippur. We will fast. We will remember those whom we have lost. We will ask forgiveness from God and from one another. We will travel a long spiritual road.

And where is it supposed to lead us?

Home. Back to ourselves. Back to the people we love. Back to the values we may have neglected. Back to the person we hoped to become.

The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, usually translated as repentance, literally means return. As Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, teaches, the principal role of teshuva is for a person to return to the root of one's soul. To return to core elements within ourselves that we have long forgotten.

So as this new year begins, I invite each of us to ask ourselves:

What journey do I need to take this year? What truth about myself have I been avoiding? What relationships need my attention? What am I carrying that I no longer need to carry?

And what treasure might already be buried beneath the floorboards of my own life, waiting for me to notice it?

During these High Holy Days, may we have the courage to take that journey. May we conduct our *heshbon hanefesh* with honesty, but also with compassion. May the shofar awaken us not merely to the ways we have fallen short, but also to the possibilities still before us.

And, after all our wandering, may we find our way home—to one another, to God, and perhaps most importantly, to the truest version of ourselves.

Shanah tovah.