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Rosh Hashana

Starting the New Year Awake

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Class of 2013

There is a well-known custom not to take a nap on Rosh Hashana. One common understanding is that the way a person acts on Rosh Hashana indicates the way the rest of her year will go, and we certainly don't want to have a "sleepy" (i.e. lazy) year. (Other reasons include the fact that it is inappropriate to slumber while judgment is being passed.) So each Rosh Hashana, after a long morning service and a large holiday meal, many of us find ourselves trying to fight off the inevitable Rosh Hashana afternoon snooze.

Skeptics may see this custom as mere superstition. Could one action, an innocent nap, really have cosmic, long-lasting effects on one's year? Still, there seems to be an endless array of do's and don'ts on Rosh Hashana, with the assumption that what happens on Rosh Hashana spills over into the year. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Horayot 12a) records specific foods that one should eat, as an omen for a good year: gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates. Over the centuries, other culinary customs have developed, such as eating a pomegranate or a sheep's head, and not consuming nuts. The Hassidic master, Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz insisted that one should not eat sour foods on Rosh Hashana lest our faces become grimaced or distorted, which would then be engraved in our faces – and our lives – for the rest of the year.

It may seem like a bit much. But chances are that even the greatest skeptic, who may be happily napping on Rosh Hashana afternoon, has adopted the symbolic action of dipping apples in honey on Rosh Hashana. Do we really think that eating a certain food or doing a specific action will magically deliver us a good year?

Psychologists have discovered something that is counter-intuitive. We might assume that behaviors follow emotions. In other words, if I feel a certain way, or have a specific attitude about something, then I will enact a behavior that is consistent with that emotion.

However, research has shown that it often works in the opposite direction; once you enact a behavior, the emotion will follow. This is known as the James-Lange theory of emotion. Proponents of this theory will assert that if I am depressed, I shouldn't wait to feel better to go out and engage with the world. Rather, by going out and engaging with the world, I will feel better. This is one empirically supported approach to treating chronic depression.

In other words: not only do we smile as a result of being happy; rather if we smile more, we will become happier people.

This implies that our behaviors or actions in some way seep through our skin and into our psyches. What begins with a new action might end with a new attitude. An external behavior, even artificially



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created, can yield an internal result. In this way, our actions can, in fact, change our life's reality - our internal reality. If we focus on behaving the way we want to be, then those behaviors will ultimately become who we truly are.

Judaism is an action-based religion. We focus on fulfilling mitzvot, on performing ritual, and on bettering the world around us. As we are taught in Pirkei Avot (1:17), "The essential thing is not study, but deed." We try to spend our lives focusing on our external actions, for that will lead to true internal change.

Rosh Hashana is the day to act like our ideal selves, to enact the way we hope that we will be throughout the year. If we eat specific foods on Rosh Hashana, it is in order that we may actualize these traits in our lives. If we refrain from sleeping, it is because we want to be more "awake" in our lives every day.

It is not that these activities will magically bring about a new reality during the year. They do, however, have the potential for helping us become who we hope to be. And it is not just the food and the sleep: if I want to be kinder this year, I should do something kind on Rosh Hashana. If I want a deeper spiritual life, I should focus on developing that on the first day of the year. And perhaps, if I'd like to commit to getting more sleep this year, I should take a nice long nap on Rosh Hashana afternoon!

Shana tovah.

A happy, healthy, sweet (and restful) New Year!



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