

# Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776 NPLS at Watford Colosseum



## This is Your Year

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Let me invite you to have a quick glance at the inside cover of your prayer book. You will see that the LJ Machzor is called, Ruach Chadasha - a new spirit. And if you look at the facing page, you'll see that through the quote from Ezekiel, the title connects this prayerbook to our regular prayer book, Siddur Lev Chadash - a new heart.

This quote from Ezekiel (36:26): *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you;"* is so appropriate for the New Year. For with the New Year, we have a chance for newness within our hearts and spirits, a newness that can change the course of our lives.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro picks up this idea and suggests that we don't just need a new heart and spirit but also a new head: "Rosh Hashanah is 'Head (rosh) Changing (shenah) Day.'" As Rabbi Shapiro puts it: "You can't have a new year with an old head. So if you want a new year, you are going to need to get a new head."

Although great progress has been made with transplantation medicine, I think Rabbi Shapiro isn't suggesting that we literally get a new head, so the question posed for us is how are we to go about getting a metaphorical new head?

Our tradition teaches us that in order to get a new head, we must begin with Teshuvah, with repentance.

Our liturgy encourages us to look at the last year and inspect our failings. As we read just before the Avinu Malkeinu:

*"We would do better to recognise that it is we who cheat, distort and destroy - 'we', and not 'they'; better to acknowledge that if the society around us is ugly with selfishness, falsehood and violence, the fault must lie not in our stars but in us."*

This is no easy task. It is hard to focus on what we did not get right, it is hard to accept responsibility for our personal shortcomings and even harder to take responsibility for the shortcomings of our society.

We enter this period of the Yamim Noraim - the Days of Awe, with images of dead children etched in our brains, images of war and terror. We see on the news and in the papers the faces of people in desperate need, prepared to risk everything, literally everything, for a chance at a better future.

We recall vividly our own fear in the weeks and months after the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen. Even at home in this country, things have often looked bleak - we are all braced for a continuation of austerity and the recent change in the leadership of the Labour Party, with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as its new leader, has had the Jewish community on edge.

So how can we embrace responsibility for all of this without falling into despair? Will a focus on all the bad of the last year really help us to get a new head for the new year?

Maybe we can learn a lesson from another Jewish festival to help us answer these questions. The festival that I'm thinking of actually falls into the first month of the Jewish calendar, which is Nissan and not the month of Tishri, which we are beginning today on Rosh Hashanah, the new year. In Nissan, in the first month of the Jewish calendar, we celebrate Pesach. On Pesach, we recall the history of our suffering in Egypt - we tell this story as if we ourselves were slaves and strangers in Egypt. This lesson of Pesach is of key importance in our tradition - over and over the Bible reminds us: you were strangers in the land of Egypt "Gerim hayitem be-erets Mitsrayim."

By this commandment, we are instructed to focus on the hard times, on the difficult times, in order to learn positive lessons for the future: lessons about how human beings should treat each other and how we should treat ourselves.

And so it is also with our High Holy Days - we look at our shortcomings and the shortcomings of our society not for the sake of dwelling on our failure but as a way to focus on making a change for the better.

Rather than just pessimistically looking backwards, we must try to shift our focus from the dark past to a better future. Yet, often it is so much easier to be pessimistic than optimistic - to resign ourselves to the idea that we cannot change the world around us and focus on bracing ourselves for further days of hardship.

But I think this would not only run counter to our Jewish tradition but also do a disservice to us and our society. We are reminded that we were strangers and called upon to accept the responsibility of no longer being strangers and slaves. We are in charge of our own future. Our liturgy is very good in helping us focus on what was and where we have missed the mark; just think of that last line of the Avinu Malkeinu:

*"Our Creator, our Sovereign, be gracious to us and answer us, for there is little merit in us; treat us with charity and kindness, and be our help."* - Not exactly a great pep-talk for looking optimistically towards the future.

I'm not naive - I know that life is filled with hardship for many and that tomorrow might look rather bleak for some. But even the rabbis of old, who lived at times of great hardship, looked at humanity as having great potential. In a Midrash (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 38a), reflecting on the creation of humanity, they taught:

*"Only one single person was created to proclaim the greatness of God, for an emperor will stamp many coins with one die, and it will always show his own face, but God has stamped every person with the die of the first person [made in God's image], yet each of us is unique. Therefore, everyone must say, "For my sake the world was created."*

So if we will all truly say 'For my sake the world was created,' we should be looking forward with optimism. We should embrace today, the first day of a new year, and say loudly: This is my day.

While our liturgy might not provide us with the words to shift our minds to this new attitude, I have recently had the great pleasure to listen to a young Scottish poet, MiKo Berry, who encapsulates in his poem "This is your day" exactly what I'm trying to say. Even though I won't be able to do it justice, let me quote some sections of this poem here (and if you enjoy his words, I encourage you to find his performance on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/fmp6k1d3iq8>, which is really fantastic):

*This is your day  
can you feel it?  
[...]*

*To find strength in your weaknesses,  
take pride in your vulnerability, REJOICE in your own mortality  
because the reality is that the totality of people who would wound you by choice  
is far less than those that will work together  
to heal you again.*

*And if you feel you can't believe in that then believe in this:  
So seldom do we ever hurt each other on purpose  
it's always accidents or afterthoughts  
but people will go out of their way to do good  
this is your day*

*Look up  
remember that no matter how grey it appears  
the sky is always blue.  
We're just waiting for the clouds to pass  
And they will*

*The sun will warm the backs of our necks and shine God's spotlight upon us  
Because this is your life, this is your stage, this is your day.*

*Have you ever had one of those days where you wake up and decide for no good reason that  
it's probably going to be a bad day?  
Yeah, this is not that day!*

*Today you woke up with fireworks for fingertips  
it's time to put on a show  
Let go of the days that came before because today is MORE  
Of everything that you need it to be  
Everything that you hoped it would be  
And if it's time for a change, then maybe this is your day to change it  
Mix things up a little, rearrange it  
Look at your dream, reach out and take it  
And if you don't yet have one, then maybe this is your day to make it  
But don't make the mistake of thinking you're not  
something special*

*I assure you*

*You are.*

*This is your day*

*There will still be problems that stand in your way but we'll be ready*

*[...]*

*Today I've named your smile after Moses*

*Just watch*

*as he parts all of the problems that you've read and see*

*Today*

*all the drama comes with a sprinkle of laughter*

*[...]*

*But if in spite of all I've said, you still feel like demons are nailing your feet to floor,  
then cry*

*Let it out*

*And know that although there may be no guarantees*

*of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow*

*You're not the only one chasing colours*

*Resist the urge to compare yourself to others*

*Theirs is a different journey*

*And remember, your progress is not always linear.*

*1 step forward and 2 steps back is not a disaster*

*IT IS A DANCE ROUTINE!*

*Make mistakes with jazz hands, because the best laid plans*

*aft gang apley*

*We never get lost, my friends*

*we just took a few detours along the way*

*and didn't we see some incredible things?*

*:)*

*[...]*

*When the very stars come out to cheer you on each night*

*Open your eyes, open your hands, open your arms*

*take flight*

*This is your day*

*Can you feel it?*

So this is what we must remember in order to get a new head, a new heart and a new spirit for the new year: This is my day. This is my year. I have the power to make it so. And I can make sure that it is the same for others - be they near or far. Because every human being can say *"For my sake the world was created."*

So let us pray that when we meet again next year to reflect on the year, which still lies ahead of us, that we can do so with pride and in the knowledge that we did our best; so that we can look at each other and say: this was your year, this was my year, this was our year. Ken Yehi ratzon - and may this be God's will.