

Cheshbon Nefesh

an accounting of the Soul, the Life Force within us.

by Rabbi Shafir Lobb

Each year between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we are asked to do our own accounting, our own self examination. We are challenged to contemplate our essence, our inner being. This is not done to beat ourselves or to relive failings and shortcomings.

Rather, the purpose of the process is to allow ourselves to grow into who we really are and who we can be. Everything that has happened to us to this date is revelation of the work we are chosen to do. Each of us has unique and special talents and gifts that we bring into life; our tradition teaches that each of us must live up to partnering with the Divine both within and without to help make the world a heavenly place.

During the course of the year, things happen to us that distance us from ourselves, from each other and from the Source of All. It doesn't happen all at once, rather it happens in bits and pieces. Slowly and steadily it builds to a crust that can harden if we let it.

During the year we have been hurt, become angry, shed tears and suffered. There is so much in our lives that may even strike at us deeply within.

These experiences and events can block us from acknowledging the amazing power within us and lead us to think that we may not be up to the tasks before us. We may delude ourselves into thinking that we are powerless, isolated or unable to change. We may also come to believe that change and growth require unbearable pain and further risk of hurt.

Our calendar serves to remind us that we have a chance to really look at ourselves and own ourselves AND do it in a non-hurtful, non-judgmental way. These Days of Awe (Attention, Working on self, Evaluation) afford us a chance to connect with our Self, other people and with the One.

Unfortunately, this is not always easy. For the crust that we build up through living can prevent us from being open to any of that. And so our Sages taught that during this brief period we are to work at peeling away and breaking down some of this crustiness.

This is a little workbook to help in some of that effort. It is intended as a guide in a few areas. I invite you to singularly or in pairs or small groups to make whatever use this booklet can be for you.

L'Shanah Tovah tikateyvu – May you be inscribed for a Good Year



Shafir

Cheshbon Nefesh, an accounting of the Soul, the Life Force within us.

This booklet is for us to work with from the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, the *Yomim Nora'im*, Days of Awe (Attention, Working on self, Evaluation). Our tradition teaches that this is a time to really take an accounting of what we do, what we feel, what we really know and who we really are, and work to be a better person in the coming year. This process is not because we were “bad”, rather because we all have the potential for true greatness; our tradition asks us to live up to that potential.

In order to help us do that, this booklet will pose several “exercises” or “thought moments” to perhaps let us take a look at different things and see if there is any room in our *nefesh*, our life-soul for a fresh look or perhaps a slight shift in how we view things and therefore, how we act.

Exercise 1: Imagine for a moment that you win a wonderfully large lottery. Let’s say it is a million or two. Now, which of these scenes is MOST likely to occur as a direct result?

1. My friends and family will suddenly start to discover all of the good qualities in me OR I will buy expensive and fancy clothes and discover that there are better looking clothes on someone else or that the same clothes I just bought look better on someone else.
2. My family becomes more cooperative and more interested in doing well in their work OR I buy a great DVD player and a fantastic stereo and every CD or DVD I can find and after a week or two, don’t listen to them much.
3. My marriage becomes more romantic, tender and sexy OR I buy a large screen TV and find that the junk being shown just looks worse when it is larger and in mega stereo.
4. Sharing my new things with family and friends gives me lasting happiness OR I find myself less trusting of people because now I wonder if they want to be with me because they actually like me or just because of my money.
5. I can now take care of myself with good, healthy food and I can go to the gym often and as a result I feel significantly younger OR I run out of money before I buy half the stuff I wanted and/or helped half the people I wanted to help and now I am even more worried about money.
6. I stop worrying about my health, aging, dying, fading youth and attractiveness OR I travel to exotic locations only to find myself ensnared in one tourist trap after another.
7. I no longer feel sad, misunderstood or taken for granted like I used to OR I find lots of more expensive things that I want that not even a big lottery winner could afford.

Is it any wonder that lottery winners often say (when surveyed) that they are less happy after they win a lottery than before and a surprisingly large percentage will volunteer that they wish they had never won the lottery?

NOW, imagine you could take a pill that would stop your desires for the things that money can buy, without stopping you from striving for your goals and enjoying their achievement if they are accomplished. If you took that pill, how would your life change?

What can you do to take this learning into your life?

Exercise 2: Our words impact us as much as they impact others – and they reflect MOSTLY on who and what WE are. Consider the following phrases and see if they ever creep into your talk or thoughts:

1. She doesn't deserve all the good things that happen to her, she deserves to suffer.
2. Anybody that stupid deserves whatever happens to him.
3. That person's life is a waste. He's not worth the air he breathes.
4. He's a failure and always will be.
5. What can you do with an idiot/psycho/jerk/creep like that?
6. I don't care if she lives or dies.
7. She only has herself to blame.
8. He has no right to be so selfish/stupid/arrogant/etc.
9. She has no right to inconvenience me like this.
10. I hate the way he's so arrogant, like he knows everything.
11. I hate her condescension. Some day she'll find out what I really think of her.
12. He should be more reasonable. No wonder he has so many enemies.
13. He likes to make people hate him.
14. He only feels comfortable when others are uncomfortable.

Put yourself into a pleasant place, someplace you enjoy being. Now read these phrases from the lines above. Do you feel a change inside you as you "say" these words? Perhaps you become aware of a knot inside you? And there are no names in the words above. The power these words and thought have in you are from the word combinations themselves.

Hurtful thoughts fall into several categories:

- 1) Wishing harm or unhappiness or misery on someone.
- 2) Taking pleasure when someone experiences sorrow or misfortune.
- 3) Blanket condemnations of someone or a group of someones.
- 4) Wishing the natural consequences of someone's poor judgment happened stronger, faster, etc.
- 5) Nursing hatred or contempt for another person or group of persons.
- 6) Declaring someone "unworthy" of desirable outcomes.
- 7) Working for or planning or wishing for revenge and/or humiliation of someone or a group.
- 8) Encouraging others to think or feel this anger or hatred.
- 9) Exaggerating bad qualities and failing to consider good ones.
- 10) Attributing differences of opinion and/or errors in judgment to stupidity, ignorance or mental illness or "inherent trait".
- 11) Unwillingness to admit that the other person might be accurate and that you might not be.

Such thoughts create a "toxic" atmosphere for the speaker/thinker and those around that person.

Consider the following: A teenage boy has threatened your child and spray painted gang graffiti along a nearby fence.

Hurtful thought	Challenging that thought	Alternate gentler thought
I'd like to kick his delinquent rear until he begs for mercy.	That probably would not do any good. I probably would not do it anyway. The anger or hate only really hurts me.	I must think of a way to prevent this from being a problem in the future.

Hurtful thought	Challenging that thought	Alternate gentler thought
He has no right to behave this way, who does he think he is?	Why do I waste my time with thoughts like this? He is who he is -- rights are not part of it.	I can use my anger to stimulate my actions to solve to the challenge.
He belongs behind bars!	Would that really make the neighborhood safer? It might not really be a fair punishment, either.	I'll figure out how to confront him with the damage he's done or I'll consider other options.
He's just another worthless punk/jerk...	He is a child who lives in poverty and may not be properly supervised. There may be problems in his family.	He's a human being who has made me very angry. That is all I really know about him. If I want, I can learn more about him.

Non-toxic, gentler thinking comes from recognizing:

- No one's desires are any more important than anyone else's is, nor are they less important.
- Few people knowingly do wrong.
- Everyone makes errors of judgment and everyone speaks/acts from anger sometimes.
- No one asks to be stupid/mentally ill/addicted. No one requests his/her personality or birth situation.
- Everyone wants the same basic things: wealth, status, love, etc – for the same basic reasons.
- No one feels that they have been blessed with as much as they want and/or need.
- Everyone is afraid of losing the good things they have.

Such thinking does not negate anger or make one powerless; self-assertion is always more effective when done from a place of non-toxic thinking. Such shifting and containment of powerful emotions like anger can allow that energy to be directed at solutions instead of at self-harm.

Now consider a situation in your own life in your dealings with another person (Use as many rows as appropriate to the situation you are considering):

Hurtful thought	Challenging that thought	Alternate gentler thought

What do you feel inside as you shift to the gentler thought? Is your breathing different? Is there a difference in your heart rate?

How does thinking/saying hurtful thoughts make an "other" out of someone or a group of someones?

Exercise 3: Being “fully present” . Consider these thoughts/phrases:

1. I don't like this weather. I wish it were cooler/hotter/drier/etc.
2. How could anyone own a car/house/boat THAT color?
3. If only I were taller/thinner/younger/older/etc.
4. These roses are okay, but I prefer daffodils.
5. I wish we had some charming/ witty/successful/etc. friends instead of your ___ friends.
6. What a lovely sunset, it would be perfect if only there was no wind/mosquitoes/flies/etc.
7. Why would anyone spoil such a lovely _____ with _____?
8. She'd be so pretty if only she would get a nose job/lose weight/etc

These phrases have several qualities in common. They express:

- Complaints about things that are not likely to change.
- Deliberately make the thinker/speaker uncomfortable by exaggerating what is undesirable.
- Give an illusion of superiority relative to one's environment.
- Cultivates an attitude that the universe needs to adapt to the thinker/speaker's desires.
- Makes one a self-appointed judge of his/her surroundings, as if life were about judging an art show or beauty contest.
- Makes unnecessary comparisons - if roses are what is before you, why compare them to daffodils?

Brooding or Worrying	Why it is unnecessary
Back in the ninth grade, I was bullied and beat up by a bully and my girl dumped me and started dating him.	I have learned from that experience and thinking about it helps no one. It happened. It's over.
My spouse met a friend for lunch and tried to hide it from me.	I have a silly idea that if I go over it enough in my mind I will understand what happened and why. Even if I had a time machine that would not be true and brooding is a very poor time machine.
I said/did something foolish once in front of people (or at a meeting, etc).	I imagine that others never commit this type of error. I hear and see it happening all the time. I'm more careful now, that's what's important.
Wondering if my child will be partnered/single/gay/lesbian/etc.	There is nothing I can do about it and I will not love him/her less, no matter what.
Worrying that my occupation will become obsolete.	I already have a long list of things to do to improve the situation. I'm doing some and waiting for future developments. I'm handling it the best I can.
I will never be able to retire.	I am doing the best I can to make a living and save money. If I find a better way, I'll make a change. Until then, I can't do better than my best.
Dreaming of owning a faster computer.	I once bought a “state-of-the-art” computer. It took me a long time to learn how to get it set up and use it and I wasted a lot of time in high-tech, unsatisfying activities.
My father could have been more kind/sensitive/patient/etc.	I already understand that as well as it can be understood.
My _____ was stolen last month.	I am taking extra precautions now and I don't think it will happen again. If it does, I will deal with it.

Let's consider the roses and daffodils. Does this mean that you should not prefer one to the other? No. It means when someone gives you an arrangement of roses, appreciate it for its beauty, the thought behind the gift, etc. Do not think "Nice, but I wanted daffodils." However, if someone says "Roses are on sale today" and you prefer daffodils, it would be reasonable to say "Thank you, I really prefer daffodils."

Being "fully present" is a heightened sense of what is around you. An exercise you can do with another person or by setting a timer for 15 minutes. **Be sure to suspend judgments during these:**

- Notice the feel and heft of the book/object in your hand.
- Notice the pressure of the chair/bench/bed against your body.
- Hear and take in all of the sounds around you, including the unimportant ones and the ones you make.
- Notice the smell of the room (each room has a distinct smell).
- Look around. See without evaluating anything.
- Notice your breath. Feel and hear it. Notice your heart beat. Notice your digestive sensations. Notice different parts and sensations of your body.
- Become aware of the tempo of your thoughts and your moods. Do not try to change them, do not resist changing them, just notice them.
- Gently pay attention to the here and now until the exercise time is up. When you find yourself drifting to the past or the future or to problem solving, gently bring yourself back to the here and now. Do not criticize yourself. Repeat as necessary.

Inattention versus Fully Present. Notice how the Inattention impacts you in the samples. Complete the table with some of your moments of Inattention and then the realities of the situation and what the "fully present" thought/action might be:

Inattention	Reality	Fully Present
I wish this game with my child would end so I can go read the paper.	If I were at the office working I wouldn't worry about the paper, I'd want to be with my child.	I can relax and breathe deeply and focus on the pleasure of time with my child instead of the tedium of the game.
Ohmygosh! The neighbor has painted his house day-glo orange and purple! I can't stand it!	There is nothing I can do about it. He won't repaint it on my account. I'll get used to it.	This is exactly what makes life interesting. You never know what will happen next.
If I have to watch one more beer commercial during the time-out I'll just shoot myself and end my misery.	No advertisements would mean I would have to pay to watch the game or no televised sports. I can ignore the commercials if I choose.	I can get out the birdseed and feed the birds during the commercials. I'll hear the game when it comes back on.

Exercise 4: Gratitude. It is easy to not be grateful. Examples of Ingratitude abound:

- I deserve to be treated courteously by store clerks.
- I've paid my dues; I shouldn't have to work for such a low salary.
- It's hard to soar with eagles when you associate with a bunch of turkeys.
- I have a "champagne and caviar" taste in a "pop and CheeseWhiz" world.
- Why can't my spouse be as attractive and sexy as spouses are supposed to be?
- I have to take _____ medications. What did I do to deserve this?
- Oh Wow.... another ... exciting ... sunset (said sarcastically).

We are often ungrateful when we fall into one of these places:

- Believing that life's little/subtle pleasures are not worth the bother.
- Wanting as much excitement and pleasure as possible and being angry or disappointed when this does not happen.
- Feeling entitled to the good things you crave.
- Believing you are more entitled to happiness and comfort than someone else.
- Believing you should not have to suffer the disappointments/discomforts/hardships of life that others sometimes experience.
- Feeling or being unable to get over a disappointment.
- Believing your desires are so important that it does not matter how you satisfy them.
- Assuming that if your desires are thwarted, someone deserves the blame or retaliation.

How often have you fallen into one of these traps? Does this mean that it is wrong to prefer steak to hamburger or champagne to pop? No. It means being able to appreciate what we have chosen (for example we may only have the money for pop and not champagne, and so we "choose" pop), or what "is". For example, after watching a sunset over Jerusalem or the Eiffel tower, it might not seem as impressive behind the neighbor's house.

This is not a theoretical problem. Middle-class Americans today fall into the richest 1% of all people alive on earth and into the richest 0.1% of all of the humans who have ever lived. In a way, we have already won a lottery. We fail to notice that because we focus on the tiny, tiny number of people who are richer than we are, so we feel poor by comparison. This even happens to big lottery winners. Their entire winnings might not even be enough to pay a billionaire's utility bills for a year. If they focus on that detail, they can easily stop noticing the smaller pleasures and joys around them.

And Gratitude MUST be freely chosen. Gratitude expressed under a sense of duty or obligation fails to convey any of the benefits of true gratitude. Gratitude is a gift **you give yourself** and yourself alone. Feigning the appearance of gratitude because of social pressure is only good manners or submissiveness. It is NOT a social obligation. Gratitude is, very simply, a pleasant, happy feeling that comes from noticing and appreciating a good thing in our lives. It takes work to cultivate and develop this sense within us and it can easily slip out of our consciousness if we let it.

You may feel a need to say thank you to someone when you are grateful. For some people this act enhances the sense of their gratitude. Feel free to say it or not say it to a person or the universe.

Exercise with Gratitude: Consider something in your life/surroundings/etc. With another person or alone, slowly consider the following questions and allow the answers to come to you rather than “solving” them (Allow the feelings that arise to also “come” to you without preconceptions and honor what does happen without judgments):

- What is good about this item?
- What do you like about it?
- How does it please you?
- In what way are you lucky to have it?
- How would you feel if you lost it?
- How many times has it given you pleasure?

If and/or when a sense of gratitude comes to you, think to yourself,

- I feel grateful now.
- My capacity for Gratitude is deep and growing.
- I am receptive to deeper feelings of Gratitude.
- I have so much I could be grateful for right now, if I choose.

Repeat this process whenever you like and without pressure. You can practice Gratitude for the rest of your life and you can do it while working, driving, swimming, bicycling or even meditating or dreaming.

Conclusion: Set some visions for yourself based on what **you did** in doing these exercises, what **you felt** as you did them and as a result of doing them. Incorporate what **you learned** into your **Being**. Recognize how your essence is changed, as this work becomes part of you.

What will you Do differently?

How will you Feel about yourself, your surroundings, the universe?

What have you learned and what do you now Know?

What will this effort allow you to Be?

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