



CHAG V' CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Rosh Hashanah 5775

By Awakening from Our Slumber, We Can Change the World

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

In the midst of his presentation of the laws of *teshuvah* (repentance), the 12th-century philosopher Maimonides writes about the balance of a life. Each of us, he says, has merits and demerits, good deeds and bad. Our lives are judged as a whole—at the end of life, and also every year on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year.

He continues:

Even though the blowing of the shofar on the New Year is a biblical decree, it nonetheless contains a deep meaning, as if to say: Awake, sleepers, from your sleep; rouse yourselves, slumberers, from your slumber. Examine your deeds, return in repentance and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and spend their years on meaningless pursuits that neither profit nor save, look to your souls and improve your ways and works. Let each leave his ways that are bad and thoughts that are not good. *Therefore throughout the year everyone should regard himself and the world as if evenly poised between innocence and guilt.* If he commits a sin he tilts the balance of his fate and that of the world to guilt, causing destruction. If he performs a good deed he shifts the balance of his fate and that of the world to innocence, bringing salvation and deliverance to others. That is the meaning of [the biblical phrase] “the righteous person is the foundation of the world” (Prov. 10: 25), namely that by an act of righteousness we influence the fate of, and save, the world. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4).

This is a fascinating passage. Without an alarm-call from heaven, Maimonides says, we can sleepwalk through our days. At the same time, one act can change a life, transform a world. How so? Our acts and interventions have vast ripples of consequence—spiritual, psychological—of which, for the most part, we are unaware. There are some effects we can only achieve if we do not intend to achieve them.

So there is a truth that we can neither be aware of nor act on all the time, even though it is true all or most of the time. What we do affects others, and cannot but affect others. We give them comfort or leave them feeling inadequate and alone. We embarrass them or make them feel they belong. A smile can lift a person for a day. A cutting comment can leave a scar that lasts a lifetime. A word of encouragement can open up for someone a possibility or a source of energy that they did not have before. Of such passing moments are our images of the world made. Through these micro-interactions we have an effect on other lives.

Maimonides' account of human behaviour—Talmudic in origin—is an early anticipation of chaos theory (or complexity theory), best known through meteorologist Edward Lorenz's 1963 description of the “butterfly effect.” This is the idea that the beating of a butterfly's wing in Australia can cause a tornado in Kansas or a monsoon in

Indonesia.¹ So interwoven are the chains of cause and effect in complex systems that there is no natural equilibrium, no way of foretelling what the result of an event will be. Small acts can have large outcomes. Maimonides' assertion about the power of deeds is chaos theory applied to human behaviour.

But, of course, we rarely think in such terms. We act, most of the time, without regard for these chains of consequences. We live in the moment, for the moment, within the parameters of the moment. This means that much of the significance of our acts and their effects on others is hidden from view. That is what Maimonides means when he says that we spend much of the year sleepwalking; a great deal of our waking life is like a dream. We find it difficult to stand outside the moment and view the scene from the vantage point of someone else, let alone to see it *sub specie aeternitatis* ('from the perspective of eternity'). That is why we have a special time of the year when we undergo this focussed act of attention. It is called Rosh Hashanah, the New Year.

On Rosh Hashanah we engage in a specific meditation. We think of God as a judge in a courtroom passing a verdict on our life. Will we, or will we not, merit a stay of sentence from mortality and be granted another year? That depends on how we have used God's greatest gift—time itself. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are festivals of time—*individual* time, as opposed to the collective Jewish experience of time and history that is the subject of the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. The questions we ask ourselves on Rosh Hashanah are about the use of time. Did we use it to serve a purpose, or did we merely exist? Did we use it for ourselves or did we share time with others? Did we bring blessing into a life other than our own?

Here, Jewish thought rises to the summit of faith in the significance of the individual. *One act can change a world. A moment can vindicate a life.*

There is a different view, implicit in many philosophies and mysticisms, that nothing we can do as individuals can affect history, change the course of the world, make a difference in the scheme of things. Measured against the universe and eternity—this view posits—our lives are dust on the surface of infinity, and to believe otherwise is infantile illusion; the only person we can affect is ourselves, and the only way to live with our insignificance is to accept it and gather what pleasures we may in the all too brief span of years we call a life.

But there is another and deeper truth, that even if our life is only the beating of a butterfly's wing, we can set something consequential in motion. We cannot change the world altogether in one go, but we can have an effect—one act at a time, one day at a time, one person at a time. That is the essence of *tikkun olam*, healing the fractures caused by suffering and loss, evil and injustice. That is what it is, intimates Maimonides, to be awake: to know that our acts make a difference, sometimes all the difference in the world.

May the shofar of Rosh Hashanah summon us to yet greater achievements so that we can remain true to our faith and a blessing to others, regardless of their faith. And may we be blessed with a sweet year and inscribed in the Book of Life.



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¹ See Edward N. Lorenz, *The Nature and Theory of the General Circulation of the Essence of Chaos* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993). See also J. Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

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