

L'Shana Tovah U'Metukah: For a Good and Sweet Year.

My name is Reb Minster and I'd like to tell you about the time I was banned from a prominent Jewish Facebook group because someone thought I was a Christian missionary.

Now many of you don't know me, so with all due respect to our non-Jewish family and friends, let me assure you that I am not now nor have I ever been Christian.

My surname, Minster, began in Russia. My grandfather, Sam Minster, z"l, was on the steps of a family home with his uncle when the Cossacks rode into town, and shot and killed his uncle. That's when the Minster's decided Russia was no longer a safe place for Jews and left, which inspired the majority of their shtetl to pull up roots behind them.

My maternal great-grandfather, Dave Margolis, z"l, was forced to join the Russian army. That was a time when the Russian government rounded up the majority of Jewish boys for army service, not only using them as child soldiers, but also trying to indoctrinate them into Christianity. My great-grandfather killed his commanding officer and used his identity to escape, managing to marry Minnie Sudakin, z"l, in London while they were making their way to America.

Knowing my family history from my earliest days, I've always identified myself as a Jew. In my most cynical years, I declared myself "culturally, not religiously" Jewish. Still, whenever I was asked, "what are you?" My response was always, "I'm a Jew."

So how did I manage to get myself labeled a Christian missionary? Because in my rabbinical school devotion to diving deep into our tradition, I was flooded with enthusiasm for God's grace.

I can hear what you're thinking through Zoom. God's grace? Is she meshugeneh? Oy, such a goyish thought!

It's true that our Christian fellow travelers seem to have a monopoly on the English phrase, God's grace.

A major part of my spiritual journey is stripping away what I thought I knew about the distinctions between religions and allowing myself to be open to the breadth of Jewish wisdom. It turns out that our Christian friends do not have a monopoly on God's grace. I know you're still skeptical, so allow me to go a little bit deeper with grace.

Grace is *chen* in Hebrew. It is one of the 13 Attributes of the Divine. *El Rachum v'Chanun*: God, Compassionate and Gracious. This list of descriptions occurs after the Golden Calf incident in Exodus chapter 32 and is proclaimed at the beginning of the High Holy Day Torah service.

So, how can we, as rational, Reform Jews, connect with this obscure line from the Bible?

My journey into prayer begins by recognizing the limits of my rational mind. I am a very logical thinker and I've always tried to approach life with a strategy.

Yet even at the height of my intellectual pursuits, music transforms me. Lyrics break me.

There is something more substantial than logic weaving my life into a coherent whole: the ideals of Love and Justice.

How does Love manifest in our lives? Through Compassion and Grace. And what do those words mean? I can't speak for God, but I can tell you how I try to live those words in my life. I try to remind myself to have compassion for my kids. That the internal logic of a five year-old is not the same as the internal logic of a forty-three year-old. So, I try to slow down and listen to why Ezra says school is boring. And I remind myself that my eight year-old, Jack, inherited his perfectionist streak from me and I need to compassionately encourage him to move beyond his frustration.

How does Grace enter my life? That feels a bit more ethereal. I can't honestly tell you that I feel it is appropriate to call any of my actions gracious, because it feels more closely connected to the Divine than to me. But the moments when I'm able to stop myself before picking a fight with my husband, Chung-Mau, feel close. We have been lucky that his work never slowed down during the pandemic. Of course, that means that instead of going to an office, he's had to work at home, and no longer has any of the regular ways of separating himself from work. Even the notion of vacation has been taken away, as we've been extremely cautious with our unvaccinated kids.

So, when I'm able to remember the financial weight Chung-Mau carries on his shoulders, starting six years ago when I quit my job to focus on rabbinical school, that's when I feel God's grace the most.

Descriptions of God work for me because they act as a blueprint for how I want to be in this world. I spend a lot of time thinking about Compassion and Grace because those attributes don't come naturally to me.

Justice, Tzedek, that's my jam. When I broke from Judaism in college it was because the religion didn't live up to my understanding of justice. My Jewish education really stopped with a simple understanding of the meaning of the Bible and the importance of rituals. I felt so alienated by those things, and by the disconnect between what was proclaimed in synagogue and how people acted in the real world.

I majored in Peace & Justice Studies at Wellesley College and got involved in the international women's peace movement. I wanted to end the military industrial complex and refocus society on life-affirming activities. I worked as a labor union organizer to help change the world. Every step I took affirmed my own righteousness and fueled my anger at the injustices surrounding me every day in the world.

My journey back into Judaism began slowly. In my mid-twenties, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and suddenly had to confront my own mortality. It took my breath away.

What exactly was my purpose in life? What gives life meaning?

I struggled through my treatment. To be honest, I had no symptoms prior to having the source of my metabolism removed. Why did I have such terrible luck? What was I supposed to do with people telling me I had “the good cancer”? Sure, thyroid cancer won’t kill me. Does that mean I don’t deserve empathy?

Does God matter if living a life dedicated to truth and justice does not ensure health? What actually matters in life?

Those questions led me back to living Jewishly and choosing to immerse myself in Jewish wisdom. I realized that holding fiercely to justice cut me off from being able to truly see the people around me. Yes, there are inherent flaws in our economy. Yet, combined with representative democracy, it is the most just and fair system humans have ever experienced.

And sometimes, people need space to live into the joy of their lives, rather than worrying about every crisis in the world.

Yet one particular crisis looms large over our High Holy Days. The pandemic and all the ways it has changed how we interact with each other can feel overwhelming.

I’ve spent more time at home with my family than I ever thought possible. At times, I’ve gotten lost in my anger that the world seems to be returning to “normal,” while I remain rigidly vigilant for my unvaccinated children’s wellbeing.

So I turn back to God’s grace. Letting the Light of the Divine surround me and envelop me in Compassion and Graciousness. This is the path I seek to return to.

How can we wake up from pandemic malaise and remember what we should be turning towards? Listen to the shofar.

The sound of the shofar has gathered our people for thousands of years. The shofar always delights me and transforms me.

We listen to the shofar in order to hear God calling us back to ourselves. We take time today to come face-to-face with how we have not lived up to our vision for ourselves.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner expertly explains in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, good things and life itself are not only given to good people. Whether or not we are kind to one another does not determine how much money we have or how long we live. Indeed, even COVID-19 does not distinguish between good and bad people. We know that COVID vaccinations work and that wearing masks properly saves lives. Yet,

we are forced to find a way to live in community with people who strongly disagree with these basic scientific facts.

And unfortunately, people continue to die: from COVID, from other illnesses, from natural disasters, and from man-made upheaval.

So what is this Book of Life we talk about on Rosh HaShanah? Can we truly take it seriously even if we insist on not taking it literally?

Absolutely.

Choosing Life is not about letting God decide your fate. It means having a vision for living a life of goodness and truth.

As Dr. Jackie Green reminded us at a recent Shabbat service, review your calendar from the last year and try to remember your interactions with people.

Did you take out your stress on your loved ones?

Gossip harshly to avoid looking at the pain of this unprecedented pandemic?

Did someone say something hurtful to you, and you need an apology to repair the relationship?

These Ten Days of Return, of Teshuvah, between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are our collective time to redirect ourselves.

Let's reach out and apologize for our misspoken words. Let's reconnect with people whom we have lost touch with. Let's recommit ourselves to our collective responsibility for the welfare of our community. And let's **self-reflect** on who we are and who we want to be.

The Hebrew word for the act of praying, לְהִתְפַּלֵּל is a self-reflexive word.

That jargon means that in the way the word is constructed are instructions for its use. To pray is not something beyond ourselves. To pray is to reach inside and to reflect on how we are acting and what we are thinking.

Am I allowing grace and compassion to flow through my words and actions? Or have I gotten stuck in my own head, focused so much on my own journey -- or so anxious about the world around me, that Divine Goodness is not part of how I live my life?

I choose to celebrate God's Compassion and Grace, El Rachum v'Chanun, because those are the aspects of God that feel the farthest from me. The pandemic has forced us to confront our collective mortality in ways that far exceed any sermon, or even any shofar blast. I choose to gently release myself from the bad habits I've gained during this time of isolation.

Rather than countless hours on social media, I will spend more time reaching out to people individually.

I choose to remind myself that God's Compassion and Grace can be the foundation of my interactions with the world. Teshuvah: I return again to myself. Tefillah: to prayer. Tzedakah: to my financial obligation to our collective future. When I allow myself to feel God's Grace, the journey from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur becomes deeper than marking time. Connecting to the Love and Justice pulsing through the universe compels me to live into the best version of myself.

By the way, I ended up having a phone conversation with the group administrator who banned me from the UnOrthodox Facebook group. Josh Kross is also the producer of several Tablet magazine podcasts. I acknowledged that I could have been more gracious in my engagement with the perspective that "grace" is not a Jewish concept. He acknowledged that there are indeed multiple ways to do Jewish. Our conversation became an example of Talmudic dialog, the age-old Jewish ideal of disagreements for the sake of Heaven. Josh referenced our disagreement and reconciliation on the Take One podcast. And I became Facebook friends with him and was welcomed back to the UnOrthodox Facebook group.

May the God of Compassion and Grace help you return to your truest path. May the God of Justice help us create justice in the world. And may our lives be filled with meaning and joy.

L'Shanah Tovah U'Metukah.
Let us co-create a good and sweet year.