

reflections and collections
Joshua Ostroff

Rosh Hashanah 2004
Kahal B'raira

1. inscriptions

Rosh Hashanah is a wonderful holiday for me. It's a special time to reflect on where I have been and where I am going. It's a time to think about my family and friends, my work and play, my inward self and my outward self, and to try to find that place of balance where I can see the past and make plans for the future. Now perhaps this is something that we should do every day – but it helps to have a holiday just for that purpose.

By truly understanding what we have done yesterday, we can do a better job tomorrow. The good things we do and the bad things we do don't really go away – they are a part of us. How we behave is within us as well. It's like history. What happened a year ago, or ten years ago, or a thousand years ago may have faded, but it is still very real. We can learn from it, we can repeat it, and we can change what comes next.

One reason that this community is so special to me is that we are writing our own books of life. We make our choices, we learn our lessons and we correct our mistakes. We can each make our own destiny; it is not decided for us. We must learn right from wrong, and we must make the right choices. It is for me to judge myself – it is for you to judge yourself, and for you to inscribe your name in your own book of life.

2. perspectives

On Rosh Hashanah, I have a special kind of place that I imagine; one is called Sawtooth Wilderness. I vividly remember the ridge of one mountain. When you get up to the top you have to go very slowly, because the ridge is so narrow that the moment you reach the top you can scoot right back down the other side. But it's very rocky, with lots of places to sit and safely rest.

What is so special about Sawtooth is that you can see for many miles in both directions. It can be a bright setting sun to the west, but a valley in cool shadow to the east. I love being able to see so clearly in both directions. It's a Rosh Hashanah kind of experience, and when I am on a ridge like Sawtooth, or at Snow Hole in upstate New York, I treasure the way that nature gives me this vista. I am on a path at the top of the ridge, and the past falls away to my left while the future falls away to my right. Fortunately, I am not afraid of heights!

I picture myself on a path that lets me look back and forward, where I can honestly see what I have done and learned and I can think about what I should do in the year to come. I need to watch where I walk, of course, but I can think big thoughts, feel big feelings, and embrace the whole world while I stride along a great seam of the earth, where the mountain ridge has pushed up to the sky and I can see to the far horizon in two directions.

3. goodbye for now

(reflections on our child leaving home)

“that’s awesome”

Taking leave and stepping ahead are two woven strands that ring this special clearing where we have gathered, soon to depart with mixed strong emotions. To so long contemplate and to then actually live this moment – and to feel it slowly recede – is at once thrilling, scary, pivotal, grounding, liberating, sad and sweet.

I love being at this cusp of life and seeing back and ahead with wonder and cheer and regret and renewal.

“that’s good stuff”

Jonah is person of the world, a brilliant mind, and a verbal gymnast with a thirst for knowledge, fun and games. He will challenge himself in new ways and carve out some space among many special peer groups. This is a wonderful opportunity and a turning point for all of us.

I love what Jonah sees in so many things, and the way he sees it. There is a skill at reducing things to a comprehensible level that so suits Jonah’s chosen professions. There’s a quiet – well, maybe not so quiet – elegant logic in his veins, which he infuses into the task or game at hand. On occasion, there’s even the cheerfully breached limit of good taste, by some standards.

To Jonah: may you achieve your dreams and always make new ones, and live a full and fruitful life.

“whatever dad”

May we stretch to grow and learn
May we savor and heed what we think and feel
May we thread the touch of time through our limbs

4. stones

I have a collection of striped rocks. If you have been to our house, you may know that we have various collections of things, but my favorite is the collection of striped stones that I pick up at the beach, on the river or just walking around.

In a striped rock I see some of the same things I love about mountain ridges, only on a different scale.

The stripe is a meeting place of two materials. Maybe it's a lattice of white stripes in a smooth red rock, or a rough green rock with a broad black stripe – or maybe a black river stone with a little edge of grey. Striped rocks have a boundary where two things came together eons ago – and then were broken apart, perhaps by an earthquake, or a flood, or a miner's shovel. Then smoothed by the waves or the wind, and dropped in a place where they catch my eye.

My collection is sort of a rest area. My rocks – well, they aren't really mine, I am just borrowing them from the earth – they have a long, mysterious history, and they have an uncertain future since I am not planning to open a striped rock museum. But for the present time they bring me joy, and they remind me of how life throws different things together – like molten rock, or people, or cities.

At Rosh Hashanah, the things being thrown together are the past and the future. Whether your past is 6 years or 60, you followed a path to this moment and you will follow a path from the place. We come together to celebrate and reflect, to take account of where we have been and to resolve to go in the right direction in the year to come. From this time – whether we are walking on a mountain ridge, or holding a striped rock, or making connections in our own special ways – may we all go forward with strength and clarity and love.

5. reflections of a cloud through time

there is time to play

there is time for sand castles
to play with wet sand and sea shells
to feel the bubbles at the edge of the waves
erasing footprints on a child's summer shore

there is time to reflect

there is time to watch the clouds
to lie on a hillside and sense cool shadows
to feel grass and sky and bright sun
writing daydreams in your lazy afternoon

there is time to rejoice

to dance with someone you love
to connect with song and bright smiles
to reach within and embrace
celebrating the ages and the sweetness of life

there is time to build

there is time to carve stone
to make something hard and rough
to hew a hefty chunk of granite
that will stake your claim to a life story

we can play, rejoice, reflect and build
we can let time slip through our fingers
feeling the grains and threads and leaves and spray
let us look both forward and ahead on this day of wonder

#####