

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE
High Holy Day Study Guide
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THIS TOO IS FOR THE BEST?



מה שלקחתי מכאן הבאתי לשם.
– מתוך תלמוד מסכת תענית כא ע"א

What I took from here I brought to there.
– *from the story of Nabum Ish Gamzu, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit 21a*

**פותחים שלשה ספרים חדשים שכל אחד
רושם את עצמו לשנה החדשה באיזה שרוצה.**
האדמו"ר מסלונים – נתיבות שלום

**Three new books are opened and each person
writes himself for the new year in the book of his own choosing.**
– *the Slonimer Rebbe, Netivot Shalom*



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Sources for Reflection

A HIGHER GOOD

The idea that there is a standard of goodness to which I must measure up according to my own faith presupposes the possibility that I might not ... When I stray from the path I believe to be right, even when the price is high and very little appears to be in my control, all is not lost. I can learn; I can return; I can repent; I can change....I can accept myself as a person who sometimes gets it wrong, because I know that I can also try afterwards to get it right...the possibility of returning, repentance, change, and learning, is the acceptance of myself as I am, with all my flaws and weakness. Not only do I matter; I matter just the way I am...There may have been other hands in the mix – parents, friends, lovers, even God. But all the help in the world could not force me to do good if I choose otherwise. In the final analysis, I was the one who measured up. What I do and think matters. I make a difference. I can make an impact on the world...This is the source of our deepest joy and greatest reason for celebration.

– Hanan A. Alexander, excerpted from, *Reclaiming Goodness: Education and the Spiritual Quest*.

BECOMING A MERIT-FINDER

A realistic, ...healthy, merit-finder acknowledges that she does not have control over all her emotional experiences – that some faults do exist in the world and that some events naturally elicit a negative response. At the same time, she also recognizes that, to a great extent, she has control over the quality of her experiences.

How can we cultivate our capacity to focus on the good? How can we become realistic merit-finders? First, we can learn to be more grateful for what we have....Another useful technique that psychologists recommend is cognitive reconstruction. For example, rather than, or in addition to, focusing on the negative consequences of a failure, we can take the time to ask ourselves what we have learned from the experience and how we can grow from it...

While I do not believe that things just happen for the good, I do believe that some people are able to make good out of things that happen. The notion that things just happen for the good is passive; the notion that we make good out of things that happen is active...

– Tal Ben Shabar, from "A Question of Focus," www.talbenshabar.com

THIS TOO IS FOR THE BEST

Why did they call him "Nahum Ish Gamzu – Nahum, the man of 'this too'"? Because with regard to everything that happened to him, he would say "this too is for the best." And it is told: Once the Jews wanted to send a gift to the court of the Caesar. They said "Who should go? 'Nahum Ish Gamzu' should go, because he is accustomed to having miracles performed on his behalf." They sent him with a chest filled with precious stones and pearls. On his way, he spent a night in a certain residence. That night, the residents arose; they took the chest, removed the pearls, and filled it with dirt. The next day, when he saw this, he said: "This too is for the best."

When he arrived at the court of the Caesar, they opened the chest and saw that it was full of dirt. The king said: "Are these Jews laughing at me?!" He wanted to kill the messengers of the Jews, who had brought him dirt and shamed him thus. Nahum said: "This too is for the best."

Then Elijah the Prophet came – appearing to the king as one of the ministers – and said to him: "Perhaps this dirt is from the dirt of Abraham their father, which, when they threw it, would turn into swords, and when they threw the straw that was in it, it would turn to arrows." There was one state which this king had not succeeded in conquering. They tested some of this dirt against that city – and succeeded in the battle. When they saw that this was indeed the dirt of the miracle, they went to the treasure house, filled Nahum's chest with precious stones and pearls, and sent him off with great honor.

On his return journey, he spent a night at the same residence as before. They said to him: "What did you bring to the king that he honored you thus?" He said to them: "What I took from here, I brought to there." When they heard the story, they thought that the dirt from their house was the dirt of the miracle. They broke down their houses and brought all of the dirt to the court of the king. They said to him: "The dirt which was brought here was from our dirt." They tested this dirt in a battle, and found that it had no miraculous powers, because the miracle had occurred only by the merit of "Nahum Ish Gamzu," and they therefore executed these residents.

– from *Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Taanit 21*

NO ONE ALONE

The exercise of a good mind, or a good personality, is the accomplishment not of escaping a tradition of thought, speech and behavior but of having understood its elements well enough to make them one's own reflectively, to sort out and distinguish among them. This freedom displays itself in a kind of propriety, or fittingness, that is twofold. A person's ideas and manner fit naturally together, and fit her disposition as well. At the same time, she is ready to respond – to other people, to ideas, to familiar and unfamiliar circumstances – in a way that is appropriate both to her and to the situation... She knows what she is about... In all of this lies the dignity of familiarity with oneself, one's work, and one's place.

This kind of intelligence is no small achievement, and no one achieves it alone. The fortunate among us take a great deal of it from our parents and immediate families, not always (or even usually) from their avowed principles, but from the patterns that their consistent tone and repeated acts present. They show us what is ordinary, what we can expect from the world, and from ourselves.

– Jeditiab Purdy, from *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*

WRITING OURSELVES INTO THE BOOK OF LIFE

Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah – ... that is to say, three new books are opened, and **each person writes himself for the new year in the book of his own choosing**. If he takes it upon himself for the New Year to be counted among the righteous and to fulfill his destiny and his role in the world from now on, through this he will be written and sealed in the book of life... And this makes it very clear, that there is no contradiction between the fact that Rosh Hashanah is a festive holiday on which we wear white, and the fact that we don't sing (Hallel) on this day because the books of life and death are opened...

– from *The Slonimer Rebbe, Netivot Shalom*

The Nesiya Commentary

When Jews celebrate the High Holy Days, we wish each other a *Shanah Tova* – a good year. Judaism's focus on goodness seems central to the message of the High Holy Days. But what are we wishing for when we say "*Shanah Tova*"? How do we bring goodness into the new year – for ourselves and others?

The challenge of bringing good into the world is expressed in a Talmudic story about a teacher named Nahum Ish Gamzu. Nahum's name reflects his response to bad news: "gam zu l'tova – this too is for the best." No matter how dire the circumstances, Nahum refuses to label a situation as bad. One way to understand the story is to see Nahum's unquestioning faith in God as the reason everything turns out well. As long as Nahum believes in God's goodness, his actions will be blessed. Nahum's absolute faith has a transformative effect on the reality in which he lives.

This approach would have us believe that any apparently bad situation may in reality be good. No matter how upset we may be by a given situation, our faith can lead us to understand that everything is not what it appears – things happen for reasons we can't understand, and which may ultimately be for the best. In his commentary on a Mishnah which obligates one to bless bad events as well as good ones, Maimonides explains that "there are many things that seem good initially, but turn out evil in the end. It is therefore not appropriate for a wise person to be upset when great troubles befall him, since he does not know what will eventually happen." (Maimonides commentary on Mishnah Brachot 9:5).

This approach, though, can lead to passive acceptance of a situation instead of action to effect change. In addition, this approach denies our capacity to distinguish between good and evil, neutralizing our role as moral agents in the world.

Perhaps what Nahum really expresses is determination to find the good in the bad. When he says "gam zu l'tova – this too is for the best," Nahum recognizes that his present situation is far from being wholly good. Through a paradoxical and courageous positive reaction to a bad situation, Nahum struggles to create the possibility for something good to take place.

Nahum's determination to find the good is strengthened by the fact that he is acting on behalf of others. The purpose of his journey is to court favor from Caesar on behalf of the Jewish community. In contrast to the townspeople whom Nahum meets on the way, who manipulate circumstances for their own self-interest, Nahum accepts the bad things that happen to him in order to continue on his mission.

After succeeding in earning favor and honor from the King, Nahum journeys back to the same place where he'd been robbed, and speaks with the same people who had stolen from him, replacing his jewels with dirt. The townspeople can't understand how Nahum possibly succeeded, and ask Nahum what he brought the King.

Nahum responds, **"What I took from here I brought to there." The townspeople understand Nahum to be referring to their dirt. We can hear in these words a teaching about humility, self-respect, and commitment to acting on behalf of others.** It is as if Nahum is saying, without blame or too much pride, "I took all that I had, all that was available to me, and I made the most of it; I took from where I was and who I am; I brought what I could to where I needed to go; I'm becoming what I need to become."

Perhaps when we say "*Shanah Tova*," we should see ourselves, like Nahum Ish Gamzu, encouraging others to search for the good. The good is there, but we always need to be ready to work hard to both see it and make it happen.

Our wishes for a Shanah Tovah – a good year – can also be directed to ourselves, and how we reconcile the tension on Rosh HaShanah between fear of judgment and festive joy. According to Rabbinic tradition, Rosh HaShanah is both a "Day of Judgment," on which all living beings come before the divine to account for their lives, and a festival day, on which we gather as families and friends to celebrate and enjoy festive meals. In response to this tension, the former Slonimer Rebbe reinterprets a passage in the Talmud that speaks about the three books that are open before God on the Day of Judgment – the Book of the Righteous, the Book of the Wicked, and the Book of Those Who Are Neither. He challenges the conventional view of how God judges us during this time, and asserts that it is not God who inscribes us in these books but ourselves – we decide how we want to live our lives and whether we can meet the challenge of living a good life. This approach may account for why in Jewish tradition Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, precedes Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. **Only the affirmation of our belief in our own goodness can empower us to begin a process of genuine regret over the past and transformation for the future.**

From this perspective, when we wish each other a "good year," we are in fact challenging ourselves to view ourselves as good and to choose a righteous path. In spite of all our self-doubt and criticism, we can choose to see the good within ourselves. **Our ability to make this choice, to judge ourselves as good, is worthy of celebration and joy.**

Nahum Ish Gamzu teaches us to search for the good even in difficult situations, and to work to transform even difficult circumstances into opportunities for good. The Hasidic Slonimer Rebbe teaches us that we ourselves have the power to decide whether we will live as righteous individuals who act for good in the world.

Contemporary thinkers also struggle with the fact that it isn't easy looking for good. Many emphasize the need to strengthen individual character not only through reflection and study but interactions with individuals, caring communities, and traditions which exemplify highly ethical and spiritual behaviors. Chanan Alexander writes, in "Reclaiming Goodness," that "we cannot fully comprehend any vision of the good unless we experience it in action." In his book against cynicism, ironic detachment, and "the studied refusal to hope or trust openly," Jedidiah Purdy calls the development of a good mind and good personality a "kind of intelligence" which "no one achieves alone." Tal Ben Shahar, the organizational psychologist, encourages us to become "merit-finders," people who are able "to make good out of things that happen. The notion that things just happen for the good is passive; the notion that we make good out of things that happen is active..."

Having a "good year," as Judaism defines it, is an ongoing effort. **Insisting on finding the good may be the key to unlocking the transformational power within us to act in ways which bring goodness into the world. Our desire for the good must generate acts of courageous giving, profound thought, and greater sensitivity.** Perhaps it is this process that we seek to strengthen when we ask to be inscribed in the book of life. Though our collective effort as a people, may we enter into a year of goodness for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world.

Questions to Consider: This Too Is For the Best?

1. Why is it harder, for some of us, to see the good rather than reacting to the negative aspects of a situation? Do you believe it's possible to change a person's capacity to look for the good?
2. The positive psychologist Tal Ben Shahar suggests different ways to cultivate our capacity to focus on the good: One way is "to take a minute or two each night to reflect on the day and write down five or more things that we are grateful for." Another is to focus on what we have learned and how we can grow from negative experiences, rather than, or in addition to, focusing on the negative consequences. Try these exercises during the High Holidays – alone or with others.