

Spiritual Accounting

Thought for the Day

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Tonight is the start of the Jewish New Year, beginning a month-long series of festivals, some of them genuinely festive, like the Celebration of the Torah in four weeks time, and some of them more solemn and serious.

These first 10 days, starting tonight with Rosh haShanah, the new year, and ending with the 25-hour fast of Yom Kippur, are a time of contemplation, an opportunity to assess how the past year has gone, and to form resolutions for the year ahead. We are encouraged to carry out what is called in Hebrew *cheshbon hanefesh*, literally a spiritual accounting, when just like an annual audit, we take stock, contemplate the gains and losses of the past year, and draw up plans for doing better.

This past year has been a year like no other in living memory. A year ago, with the first release from total lockdown, we were thinking positively about returning to some kind of normality. But it wasn't quite the straightforward or easy journey we'd hoped for – we could hold services, even if not as we'd known them – some virtual, some hybrid, all pared back to take the least time, with limited numbers, and congregants sitting well apart, wearing masks. Perhaps that improved decorum!

Since then we've moved through the protection levels set out in legislation and guidance, but we still have to be on our guard. So this year, as we gradually move to a kind of uneasy 'new normal', even as we look back on a year of challenges, isolation, and sadly for many of grief and mourning, let us hope that there's room at last to be optimistic.

Many Jewish communities will begin the first service of Rosh haShanah tonight with a 13th century prayer that is eerily relevant – and so I wish for us all: “*May the old year go and take its plagues with it; may the new year begin and bring only blessings!*”