

## Sabbath Week

SHABBAT NETZAVIM / ROSH HASHANAH

# Celebration In The Face Of Loss

by **Rabbi Charles Sheer**

*Special To The Jewish Week*

**T**his year Rosh HaShanah will be a personal challenge. On the second day of the New Year, I will conclude the recitation of Kaddish for my mother, Trudy. For the first time in my life, Mom will not be with me. Some of the liturgy will be a distinctive challenge.

Let me make it clear that I harbor no anger against God because He did not chose to inscribe my mother in the Book of Life. My Judaism is not that mechanical, and to be honest, Mom lived a full life of almost 93 years. It's simply that I don't relish being reminded of my loss on this glorious day. I imagine a tear will accompany my blessing on Rosh HaShanah when I thank the Almighty for having "enabled us to reach this coming year."

These Yamim Noraim [Days of Awe] are not days of national memory or celebration; they are the Days of Judgment, dedicated to self-examination, reflection, and repentance. Some of the medieval liturgical poems in the Machzor are petitions for life, health and survival in the coming year. One of the motifs repeated throughout the liturgy is the petition that "God will inscribe us in the Book of Life!"

Despite the optimistic tones of many Rosh HaShanah prayers, liturgical melodies and the grand Yom Kippur finale that concludes with "Next Year in Jerusalem," I cannot forget that the flip side of Katveinu L'chaim, the prayer/petition to "inscribe us for life," is the most dreaded possibility that accompanies all living beings, especially those who are elderly or ill.

This Rosh HaShanah I will be constantly reminded that, unlike Sukkot, Chanukah, Purim or Passover, these Days of Awe have a dark side.

I know that many others in the Jewish community will face a similar challenge. Families who have a loved on in the hospital will find that some prayers with the theme, "who will live and who will die," will not come easily off the lips. Others will find

increased fervor as they focus prayerfully upon their loved ones who are ill. But many colleagues of mine who are hospital chaplains often face unique challenges attending Jewish patients hospitalized on the High Holy Days.

First, there are the obvious sources of patient malaise, being away from family, home, synagogue and the "normal" holiday routines. In addition, the principal rituals of these days are almost impossible to observe in most hospital settings. Chaplains can arrange for a Chanukah menorah lighting, Passover seder, or the giving of Purim treats in the hospital but Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur entail the sounding of the shofar, full days at prayer in synagogue, and fasting. All are impossible or inappropriate in the hospital.

But the larger burden on the sick is the impact of the concepts that underlie these Days of Awe. Our ill do not need Days of Awe to introduce the theme of one's mortality.

As I contemplate Rosh HaShanah I anticipate that one rather modest custom will impact me greatly as I end my period of Kaddish. On the evening of Rosh HaShanah we eat an apple dipped in honey. Together with the usual bracha (blessing) for the fruit of the trees, we say, "May it be Your will that the coming year be a good and sweet one."

Before the somber liturgy of Rosh HaShanah surrounds me with awe, penitence, human mortality and other serious themes, Jewish custom will initiate my New Year with sweetness and physical pleasure. Despite the serious agenda, the Days of Awe begin with apples and honey, and conclude with a prayer for "Next Year."

This year, this little folkloric practice will hopefully enable me to reflect upon the sweet part of my life. It will allow me to thank the Giver of Life for what I have — and what I will encounter — in the coming New Year.

"Shana tova u'mtuka," may it be a rich Jewish life, full of sweetness, health and many good deeds.



'In Hospitals, the High Holy Day themes of life and death don't come easily off the lips'

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