

Dear Friends,

Judaism is the only tradition that I know that sanctifies the washing of hands. For ritually observant Jews, the blessing over hand washing is not reserved for the Pesah seder, but is recited upon washing before every meal. Leave it to our Sages to make what has the potential to be a neurotic habit an occasion for blessing.

Jews are also ritually mandated to clean twice a year. The first cleaning is associated with the festival of Pesah. The night before the seder, we are commanded to take a feather and a candle in hand and search for any crumbs of leaven that might be hidden in the corners of our home, in our work places, and even in our cars. When I moved to New York from Philadelphia almost forty years ago, I was amazed to see a “Passover Special” at my local car wash advertised in anticipation of the holiday.

The second cleaning of the liturgical year is not of our bodies nor of our dwelling places, but of our hearts. This is the search of the soul, which is the central theme of the High Holidays. For traditional Jews, this process begins the month before Rosh HaShana when penitential prayers are added to daily devotions, and the shofar is sounded at the end of every morning service. Rosh HaShana marks the beginning of a second, more intensive ten-day-long period of the search, which concludes on Yom Kippur.

I find the differences between these two sanctioned searches instructive. Though many of us begin emptying our pantries in anticipation of Pesah immediately after Purim, we can't complete the cleaning until the night before the seder. And with what do we search – with a feather and a candle. It's as if our Sages are warning us not to drive ourselves crazy with the cleaning. It's the rabbinic principle that I have called “Good enough.” Indeed, after the search is completed, one makes a proclamation that any missed *hamayts* “shall be considered nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.”

In contrast with this spring cleaning, the fall-season's heart searching is more thorough and onerous. Not only is much more time allotted for the search – a month plus ten days – you are required to travel beyond your home and work place, to get *in* your car if you must, and seek out anyone that you have wronged to ask forgiveness. If the person has died, you are obligated to go to the grave to ask for forgiveness. In acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of this task, the rabbis extended the time in which to make amends even past Yom Kippur to the seventh day of Sukkot. And still, they taught, the door of repentance I never fully closed.

Most of you are reading this letter about a week before Rosh HaShana. “Is it too late?” you may ask. It is not too late; it is never too late. The task of soul-searching is daunting, more daunting, certainly, than house cleaning or hand washing; but it is necessary in order to begin the year afresh. As a fellow transgressor, I wish you a safe journey in the weeks ahead. May you travel the paths of repentance with humility and insight. May you come to a place of forgiveness from others, and find self-forgiveness, too.

I wish you a sweet New Year. May it be one of health, purpose, and many acts of kindness and healing.

Most sincerely,
Lee