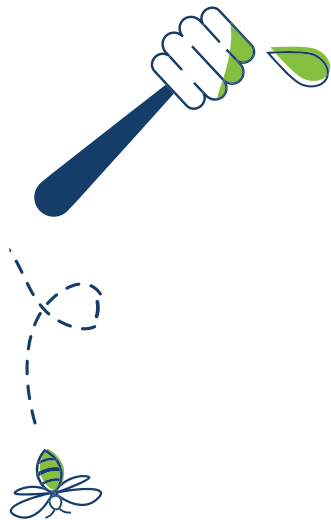




HIGH
HOLIDAYS
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NCJW™

National Council of Jewish Women



ROSH HASHANAH

EVERY YEAR, as we see the year that is ending begin to reach its twilight, we must face what has been left undone, in our own lives and in our work for a better world.

This powerful poem by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, a NCJW Rabbi for Repro and co-founder of Bayit, speaks to that “I’m not ready yet!” feeling that so many of us have when Rosh Hashanah rolls around, and what it means for us on so many levels of our lives.

You can read this poem by yourself and reflect or journal on the questions on the next page, or read it together with family or friends and use the questions as discussion prompts. This guide can be used for a powerful way to go deep over Rosh Hashanah dinner, in your NCJW Section, or in any other time together with others; it can be a chance for personal contemplation in synagogue, with a friend, or in solitude.

Shanah tovah—may we all be written for life, for joy, for giving ourselves over to the work of justice.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

Scholar in Residence, National Council of Jewish Women



AS DAYS ARE WANING

RACHEL BARENBLAT

The new year starts as days are waning.
I'm never ready when the first leaves turn.
Every Jewish day begins with evening:
darkness before light, since the beginning.

I'm never ready when the first leaves turn.
Roll the scroll toward the end of our story:
darkness before light since the beginning.
Am I ready to turn and face what's coming?

Roll the scroll toward the end of our story—
can I open my hands and let go of the summer?
Am I ready to turn and face what's coming?
You know what they say about endings.

I open my hands and let go of the summer,
paint every cracked and broken place with gold.
You know what they say about endings:
turn the page, start a chapter, begin again.

Paint every cracked and broken place with gold!
Every Jewish day begins with evening:
turn the page, start a chapter, begin again.
The new year starts as days are waning.



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- **“I’m never ready when the first leaves turn,” writes Rabbi Barenblat. What do you think she’s not ready for?**
 - Are you ready for Rosh Hashana when it comes? For the prospect of a new year, a new chapter? In what ways are you—and in what ways not?

 - **“Am I ready to turn and face what’s coming?/You know what they say about endings.” writes Rabbi Barenblat.**
 - What do you think she means by this? What do they say about endings? What sort of feelings does this bring up for you?

 - **What do you need in order to open your hands and “let go of the summer” this year? What do you need to release?**

 - **A new year begins, but some things remain unfinished—in our personal lives, and in the work for a more whole world.**
 - How might we deal with this—spiritually, emotionally?

 - **What does it mean to paint the “cracked and broken places” with gold?**
 - What are the cracked and broken places in your life right now?
 - What are the cracked and broken places that we need to paint with gold in our country right now?

 - **What are three things that you can do to take action in this new year—that you can paint with gold, create a new chapter, inscribe us in the book of justice, of action, of mercy, of loving kindness?**

 - **How would you like to begin again? What would you like to be written on this new page?**
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YOM KIPPUR

EVERY YOM KIPPUR, we read the Haftarah—the selection from the Prophets, after the main Torah reading—from the Book of Isaiah. It’s a searing passage, in which the prophet Isaiah excoriates the Israelites for their thinking that their ritual fasting is true piety, while their other actions in the world cause or ignore injustice.

Of course, the two do not have to be mutually exclusive. We can engage in the ritual fasting of Yom Kippur with the intention of allowing our observance of this sacred time to open us more deeply to the needs to the world around us, and strengthen our commitment to working for justice. This is also true for those spending the day in contemplation and not fasting.

Since those fasting don’t say the blessings over food and drink, a tradition developed around smelling fragrant scents on Yom Kippur. It’s a way of adding in some extra blessings, and engaging with the otherworldly feeling of the day.

So these blessings, now—whether or not you are fasting—can be dedicated to hearing Isaiah’s call. Don’t hide behind ritual; rather, use it as a way to bring you into the deeper spaces of your own heart and soul—into the places where transformation and then action reside.

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You can choose just about any fragrant scents for this—herbs or spices work particularly well. We suggest making or bringing something that you can have with you as you move about your Yom Kippur.

Read the following intention before making the blessing the first time you smell these fragrant scents, and perhaps every time you smell them as the day goes on, they can serve as a reminder—as your mind returns, as it inevitably will, to your own life, your own concerns, your own inner work. (You can, of course, read the intention and smell the fragrant scents without reciting the blessing, of course, if you prefer, if that resonates more with your own relationship to Judaism.)

The scent, and the intention that you tied to them, can remind you of your obligation and commitment to work for a better world—including the vulnerable women, children and families who need you to take action on their behalf—through education, through advocacy, through activism, through philanthropy, through service, and/or in some other way.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

Scholar in Residence, National Council of Jewish Women

Take your fragrant scent in hand, and recite:

I dedicate this day of Yom Kippur to my own inner work, to cultivating the traits needed—like bravery, compassion, generosity, humility, and empathy—needed to help me become more of service to a world in need of healing.

As I smell these fragrant scents, I remember the cry of the prophet Isaiah:

“This is the fast I desire: To unlock the chains of wickedness...to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the poor that are cast out into your home. When you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to ignore your own kin.”

(Isaiah 58:6–7)

Let me remember, each time I smell these fragrant scents, that I am obligated to work in the world on behalf of those in need, to fight for more just systems, and to demand that our society live up to our ideals of dignity, safety, and caring for all.

For the blessing over spices:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי בְּשָׁמִים

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheynu melekh ha-olam boreh minei v'samim.

Blessed are you, God our God, creator of spices.

If the fragrant scent is a plant, then the blessing is instead:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא עֵשְׂבִי בְּשָׁמִים

Barukh atah adonay eloheynu melekh ha-olam boreh isvei v'samim.

Then take a whiff of your scent, and breathe in your reminder of your role towards creating a more whole world.



National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is the oldest Jewish feminist civil rights organization working for equity and justice for women, children, and families in the United States and Israel.

Through the efforts of our 210,000 grassroots advocates and 50 local sections, NCJW combines education, direct service, and advocacy to affect lasting social change at the local, state, and national levels.

We approach our work Jewishly and through the intersections of gender, economic, and racial justice to center those most impacted

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