

Respect and its Role in Atonement

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Putting on a new pair of glasses can be a truly eye opening experience. While I rarely wear my glasses, I am always amazed when I do. Colors are more vibrant and visual details like the shapes of the leaves on trees and the features on people's faces are more discernable. During this season of repentance and reconciliation, the idea that we can put on a new set of eyes through which we might view the world around us with greater clarity represents a powerful metaphor for us to consider.

During these Days of Awe, our task is to observe ourselves and our behaviors through the lens of judgment. Each year at this time, our metaphorical spectacles are the tools we use to bring everything in our lives into focus so that we can ultimately re-spect ourselves and those around us. (I have hyphenated and emphasized the word re-spect because etymologically the word is inextricably linked to the ways in which we see and understand who we are and why we do what we do.)

The word re-spect comes from the Latin prefix “*re*” meaning "again" and the root “*specere*” meaning "look at". Thus, respect is ultimately the act of bringing the past into focus. When we respect ourselves and each other, we view our actions with eyes of integrity, judgment and truth.

During this season, our tradition demands that we wear our finest *spectacles* (there's that root again). These spectacles bring our transgressions into focus and enable us to observe our behaviors and their consequences in a new light. They help us see that everything we do has an impact on the world around us, and that each of us has the capacity to rectify the consequences of our misdoings.

This new perspective is not easily reached. It involves persistence, open-mindedness and humility. It demands serious *intro-spection* and a desire to see and understand how our words and actions impact the world around us.

Our High Holy Day spectacles are embodied in the Jewish concept of *teshuva*, which literally means return. Through the process of *teshuva*, we redouble our efforts to turn ourselves away from the wrongdoings of our past in order to make an earnest effort to repair the consequences of our offenses. *Teshuva*, like a pair of sacred lenses, enables us to see with clarity and discernment those aspects of our lives to which we are, all too often, blind.

As each of us puts on our High Holy Day spectacles throughout the Days of Repentance, may our eyes be opened to the possibility of seeing the world through holy lenses so that we might see where we have gone astray and become acutely aware of how we might return to the path of righteousness. For when we do, we will find spiritual renewal, personal rejuvenation, and a true sense of respect regarding ourselves, God and the world around us.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu!