

Rosh Hashana
A Time to Rejoice With Trepidation
Rabba Dina Brawer - Class of 2018

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Woman with Eyes Closed, Lucian Freud, 2002 Wikiart/Lucian Freud

Woman With Eyes Closed, a 2002 portrait by the late artist Lucian Freud is striking in its ambiguity.

Freud is known for painting from live models and for often keeping them working in extended sittings. In this particular portrait he has closely captured a woman's face with closed eyes. Her expression is unintelligible, yet something about it betrays that she's not actually asleep. As we let our gaze linger on her face, we can detect a tangle of emotions. It is unclear what they are: relief and joy, avoidance and concern.

This portrait captures what we may feel in entering a new year, our second pandemic Rosh Hashanah.

We are coming out of a rough year, one in which most of us confronted bereavement, loss and uncertainty. It has been a year in which we learned to redefine joy, to simultaneously hold hope and disappointment.

With every new beginning there are mixed emotions, the anticipation of what is yet to unfold. We are excited about the new opportunities made possible through a fresh start and new beginning, and at the same time we feel a trepidation as so much is yet unknown.

In fact, Rosh Hashanah itself is a day of tension between two contradicting sentiments: awe and joy.

On one hand it is called *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgement, and *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, names that demand a degree of trepidation, as they imply that our past will be reviewed and scrutinised.

On the other hand, it is also a day replete with symbols of optimistic and joyous anticipation for new potential and possibilities. We anticipate sweetness with the taste of honey,

abundance with a pomegranate and new experiences by tasting a new fruit. Even the traditional festival greetings exude joy.

This sense of ambiguity at the beginning of a year is captured in the laws, ritual and liturgy of Rosh Hashanah.

In the Laws of Yom Tov (Mishneh Torah, 2:17) Maimonides writes that on the festivals one should be joyful and of a good heart to fulfil the Torah's commandment "And you shall rejoice on your holiday" (Deuteronomy 16:14).

Yet in his commentary on Mishnah Rosh Hashanah (4:7) he explains that Hallel is not recited on Rosh Hashanah (and also not on Yom Kippur) because they are days of subjugation and fear in the presence of God and therefore joy and laughter would be inappropriate.

The Rosh Hashanah liturgy speaks of the day as *harat olam*, the birth of the world and a celebration of life, and we recite *Shehecheyanu*, expressing gratitude for having lived to experience this day. At the same time, these are the Days of Awe, featuring a liturgy of judgement, repentance and request for absolution. We feel anxious as we wonder what this new year will bring.

Perhaps the phrase that best captures the mood of Rosh Hashanah is *gilu be'readah*, "rejoice with trepidation" (Psalms 2:11).

Gil, "joy" and *re'adah*, literally "trembling", are emotions at opposite ends of the spectrum. And yet, it is in moments of our deepest joy, celebrating highly anticipated milestones, that we cannot escape a tinge of trepidation.

I have experienced these emotions in tension as a parent.

In buckling up my newborn in the car seat for the journey home from the hospital, and in handing my car keys to that same child (18 years later) and watching them drive off on their own. In waving goodbye on the first day at school and summer camp, and as they set off to college.

Elation and angst also bookend new beginnings, or graduations. It was the flavour of a sunny September morning a few years ago, as I walked into the beit midrash of Yeshivat Maharat in New York, excited to meet my fellow rabbinical students and eager to begin my semichah studies. And four years later, as I emerged from an intense oral examination and my semichah certificate was signed, there was that slight flutter amidst the exhilaration I felt.

Gilu be'readah, "rejoice with trepidation". Jewish tradition is one of tenacious hope, not a Pollyannish optimism, rather a realistic hope that acknowledges anxiety at the same time.

It is natural to feel a lot of conflicting emotions about the new year ahead of us, a hopefulness tinged with lingering concern or fear.

It is an inherently contradictory, yet honest approach to the coming year.

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Gilu be'readah, "rejoice with trepidation", reminds us angst is normal, and holding these concerns is important, but at the same time we stride into a new year full of hope for all the possibilities that lie ahead.

May this year bring us and our loved ones, the Jewish people and all of humanity comfort, safety and joy.



Rabba Dina Brawer is the Director of Recruitment and Admissions at Maharat. Rabba Dina was born and raised in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem, New York and London. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London, and Semikha from Yeshivat Maharat. She is the founder of JOFA UK, and the producer of #YourTorah podcast, a journey to discovering Mishnah. Her work has been featured in '10 Women, 10 Decades' a short film produced by Chocolate Films.