



Rosh HaShannah:

NEW BEGINNINGS

by Rabbi Nancy Flam,

Rabbinic Consultant to the National Center for Jewish Healing

New Beginnings

I know a woman who celebrates any New Year she can find: January 1st, *Rosh HaShannah*, the Chinese New Year, *Tu BiSh'vat* (the Jewish New Year of the trees), the first of *Nisan* at the beginning of Spring, the new academic year, her own birthday. Whence her doggedness about celebrating new years? "I can't bear to pass up an opportunity to begin anew." I understand her impulse.

Rosh HaShannah is truly about beginning anew. For the full month preceding the holiday (and until *Yom Kippur*), we are instructed to review our actions and inactions over the past year, repent for our failings, and begin a new year.

I take the review month of *Elul* seriously; without it, *Rosh HaShannah* and *Yom Kippur* wouldn't hold much meaning. Every year I look closely at my yearning and commitment to live righteously and my inevitable failings. Most years I struggle with the same familiar failings, sometimes with something new. I am always humbled by the process of reckoning, what the tradition calls "an accounting of the soul." I've begun a tradition of *Elul* conversations with a few close friends about the issues with which we are struggling; last year, one took place entirely over e-mail. In addition to these *Elul* talks, I like to hear the Shofar sounded each morning, as it is traditional. When the Shofar sounds, I think of Maimonides' focusing meditation.

Awake from your slumber, and rouse yourself from your lethargy. Scrutinize your deeds and return in repentance. Remember your Creator, you who forget eternal truth in the trifles of the hour, who go astray after vain illusions which can neither profit nor deliver. Carefully examine your souls; mend your ways and your actions; forsake the evil path and unworthy purposes. Return to God, so that God may have mercy upon you.

Rosh HaShannah is about waking up to what is most important in life, it is about purification and rededication. It focuses on "eternal truths" rather than "trifles." It renews a closeness with God. Many people with whom I've worked have told me that their confrontation with serious illness had the same effect: helping them to refocus on what is most

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Yom Kippur: Renew Us for Life

*by Rabbi Amy Eilberg,
Rabbinic Consultant to the
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Judaism, in its wisdom, teaches us to know our own mortality. Through an elegant tapestry of ritual practices, *Yom Kippur* gently leads us to confront our own finiteness, and then return to life, refreshed and renewed.

We dress in white - the color of purity, the color of the shroud. We recite the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which poses the question of who will live and who will die in the year to come. We chant the *Vidui*, confessing sin and confronting our own imperfection. We acknowledge our losses in the *Yizkor*, memorial, service; we look death in the face, we remember, and we weep.

As the day draws to a close, we enter the territory of death. Our bodies ache, our physical strength is diminished, the *Mahzor*, the high holiday prayer book, tells us that the gates are closing. We feel the urgency: there is little time left.

Finally, there is nothing more to say. We listen, hushed, to the otherworldly sound of the Shofar, calling to us to wake up to all that our life can be. And we recite the *Shema* just as we will when our final moment comes.

And then, with God's help, we return to life, to feed our hunger, to re-enter normal time. For a moment we die - pure, refreshed by prayer and confession and community, renewed to claim the gift of life again.

May these sacred days bring us exquisitely renewed vitality and faith. And may we and our loved ones be blessed with a year of health and strength.

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The OUTSTRETCHED ARM

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T'shuvah: RETURNING/RESPONDING

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The Jewish year is a spiral, and one of its several "beginning points" is *Rosh HaShannah*, when we attempt to renew our commitment to proper living through self-examination, reconciliation with others, and a spiritual return to the Divine — a complex and yet critical process known as *T'shuvah*.

Starting on this page and continuing throughout this issue of *The Outstretched Arm*, we offer a collection of eighteen timely and timeless thoughts for this season of renewal, 18 denoting "life" in Hebrew numbers/characters. Drawn from sources ancient to contemporary, these come with our warm blessings for a year of peace, healing, growth, and strength.

RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW
Rabbinic Director

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important, let go of the trivial, and renew their search for spirituality.

Sometimes, I wish *Rosh HaShannah* would come more often, so that I'd do its essential work more than once a year. The rabbis teach us to "do *t'shuvah* one day before our death." Not knowing that day, they must be urging us to do *t'shuvah* every day. By this account, a little piece of *Rosh HaShannah* might be with us always.

The liturgy

I find it almost tragic that the one time many Jews come to synagogue during the year is on the High Holidays. The liturgy presents such problems! Better to come on a quiet Shabbat when the imagery of God as all-knowing King dispensing perfect justice isn't quite so central. If one finds oneself with a traditional prayer book on *Rosh HaShannah*, the liturgy will likely inspire both exquisite moments of beauty, truth and resonance, as well as disquieting moments that bristle with dissonance.

One of the most difficult moments for me comes during the morning when we recite *Unetaneh Tokef*. I love the melody. I love the drama. I even love the clarity of the imagery. But I cannot affirm its truth. The prayer draws the image of a great book of deeds in which God tracks all people's actions and decides upon rewards and punishments accordingly. It paints God as a Shepherd, all of us passing under God's staff like sheep for judgment: "On *Rosh HaShannah* it is written and on *Yom Kippur* it is sealed: how many shall leave this world and how many shall be born; who shall live and who shall die, who in the fullness of years and who before..." All of us hear these words and tremble, especially those who are living with serious illness. I do not object to the liturgy raising our awareness as to the precarious nature of life; this, in fact, can lead to deep gratitude and celebration of our days, and to repentance and righteousness. But I do object to the clear correlation the liturgy makes between our existential fates and our deeds or misdeeds. Such views, taken at face value, can be psychologically and spiritually harmful.

So when the cantor begins to chant *Unetaneh Tokef*, I try to focus on the awesomeness of life and death, on the ability of our deeds and decisions to make an abiding difference in the quality of our lives, and on my own gratitude for being given this life with its gifts and challenges alike. I affirm the unknown of the new year, and humbly step out into it.

In Memoriam



We mourn the death of our beloved colleague
Rabbi Devora Bartnoff of Philadelphia.
Our condolences go out to her husband,
Rabbi Mordechai Liebling,
their children and family, and to all the
members of her beloved community.

May her memory be for a blessing
and her soul bound up in the bond of life.

Be Strong and Have Courage

by Tamara Green, PhD,
Founding Board Member of the NCJH and
Chair of the Classics Department at Hunter College

The Sabbath between *Rosh HaShannah* and *Yom Kippur* is known as *Shabbat Shuvah*, the “Sabbath of Return.” It takes its name from the day’s Prophetic readings which begin with the word *shuvah*, “return,” and exhort the children of Israel to return to their God/*Adonai*. The word *shuvah* is etymologically related to *t’shuvah*, repentance, and thus these sections are understood in light of the overriding High Holiday theme of turning — away from sin and towards *Adonai*.

Beyond this spiritual-religious connection with repentance, *shuvah* recalls the return of many things. It marks the completion of the yearly cycle, as the New Year begins with these “Days of Awe” when we attempt to rediscover, sense, and affirm the awe of *Adonai* within our lives. Certainly part of that awe is awe at *Adonai*’s creation, which is renewed for us by *Adonai* and by us for *Adonai*, each year. Each year the world is created anew, and, as the Talmud reminds us, we are all entitled to say, “for my sake the world was created.”

But how can we celebrate new beginnings and renew ourselves when so much of the liturgy reminds us of our frailty, our smallness, our mortality? It is especially difficult when serious illness has already brought home that lesson all too clearly.

You and I are like the cycle of the year: there is a certain sameness to our lives, and we run the risk of just going through the motions, taking comfort in the familiarity of pattern. With illness, that pattern can seem inescapable, a form of spiritual entrapment. But searching for a personal meaning in *shuvah*, we may find a reminder that each of us has the chance to create new beginnings for ourselves and within ourselves, even when the externals cannot be altered. To remember not only endings but beginnings. To be aware of the possibilities of renewal and re-direction. To feel awe at the potential that life holds, both pleasure and sorrow.

This is a time not only of introspection, but extrospection, for *shuvah* is a call of return issued to all of us as a people, to see ourselves as a community, to escape from isolation and emerge from alienation. *Adonai*’s *Hessed*/lovingkindness, offers each generation the possibility of redeeming the world. The call of *shuvah* proclaims the opportunity to make repair, of ourselves and our world; at the moment of choosing to return, *Adonai* gives us all, as a community and as individuals, the freedom to rise to a higher level of existence, the power, as Abraham Joshua Heschel said, to live spiritually. We can repair the breach between the various parts of ourselves, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and *Adonai*.

And if/when the process seems overwhelming, we can remember the words of Moses to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, not knowing what lay ahead: *Hazak ve’ematz*:: “Be strong, and have courage.”

Before his death,
Rabbi Zusya said, “in the coming
world, they will not ask me:
‘Why were you not Moses?’
They will ask me:
‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

“THE QUERY OF QUERIES”
FROM MARTIN BUBER,
TALES OF THE HASIDIM : EARLY MASTERS



There are three types
of exile and they are
of increasing severity.
The first is when Jews are
in exile among other nations,
the second is when Jews are
in exile among fellow Jews,
and the third and most severe
is when a Jew is alien to
him/herself, for then s/he
is both captor and captive,
in exile within him/herself.

RABBI SHOLOM BEN ELAZAR ROKEACH
OF BELZ, 1779-1855



A person’s true defense
attorneys are repentance
and good acts.
Even if 999 witnesses
testify against a person,
and only one speaks in
defense, s/he is acquitted....
And even if the testimony
of that one witness is
999 parts against,
and only one part in favor,
s/he is acquitted.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBAT 32A



All beginnings are difficult.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TAANIT 10B



EDITOR'S NOTE: "Who shall live and who shall die?" These provocative words from the High Holiday liturgy confront those dealing with illness, suffering and loss with a mixture of horror and hope, challenge and opportunity. Each of us has an important story to tell and The Outstretched Arm is profoundly grateful to Etta Ginsberg McEwan, Coordinator of The Toronto Jewish Healing Project, for enabling us to share this with you.



Etta Ginsberg McEwan,
Coordinator, Toronto Jewish Healing Project

*While she was
never going to be a
ballerina or a
baseball player,
she was
determined to
choreograph her
own destiny,
score runs and
avoid as many
strike outs
as possible.*

Where I Am Free:

by Etta Ginsberg McEwan, Coordinator, Toronto Jewish Healing Project

It was a hot, August day in 1931 when a blonde, curly-haired, blue eyed little girl of five complained of a stomach ache, pain all over, and was generally irritable and cranky. Within 24 hours the little girl was completely paralyzed. During the months that followed some strength was regained in her arms and hands but her trunk and leg muscles remained paralyzed. This had been a child who never had time to eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom. She was constantly racing with the wind. After all she was going to be a ballerina and a baseball player.

*One minute I held the tiller
the next, the rudder is snapped;
A split second and life's changed
course.*

These lines were written by Mrs. K. Thomas, a nursing assistant in England as her way of describing patients' reactions to disability.

In an instant the little girl learned that life is fragile and scary. As days, weeks and months went by, she began to realize that to survive she had to transfer the lost mobility and the lost muscles to her head where the brain, eyes, ears and mouth retained their strength. Many years later, a description of her in a letter of reference stated: her feet are in her head.

At the outset, the mother was told by the doctor to forget about this little girl and place her in an institution. The mother replied: Doctor, I have ten fingers. If one doesn't work so well, should I cut it off?

The child was smart, sensitive to others, articulate and observant. She had always been willful, stubborn, and held strong opinions. Prior to the onset of Polio, she already had an acute awareness of a world in which there is much injustice. These are positive attributes and help one to survive.

That did not mean that she did not cry, despair and rage against G-d. She prayed nightly for a miracle and added to Now I lay me down to sleep - please, please dear G-d make me walk again. And for extra measure she recited: Starlight, Starbright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might have the wish I choose tonight I wish that I could walk. When she was older, she said the same nightly prayer Now I lay me down to sleep—and secretly bargained with G-d to be able to walk for just 24 hours unencumbered by braces, crutches and a wheelchair. What would she do with 24 hours - three things - wash her windows and clean her own apartment, walk for hours along Fifth Avenue and run barefoot through the grass in Central Park. Such simple pleasure - forever denied.

So sudden was the illness and so devastating to the child's psyche that when she grew up she could not recall ever having walked or raced freely. She sat for hours watching other children and wondered what it was that enabled them to walk and run without falling down. She was fascinated and intrigued by the way ankles, knees and hips worked.

The years passed, marked by great physical stress, emotional stress and social stress. It was the stubbornest and strong opinions held by this little girl that helped her in her battles with the health care team. They wanted her to settle for a sedentary life. While she was never going to be a ballerina or a baseball player, she was determined to choreograph her own destiny, score runs and avoid as many strike outs as possible.

Her curiosity about why life was a daily struggle, why she was the recipient of so many pitying glances, why she was treated differently from other people, why she was stared at all the time, why strangers thought they had a right to

A Personal Journey of Faith

ask personal and intimate questions - so many whys. Growing up with severe physical limitations placed her in hospitals, institutions, and in the care of many cruel health care professionals. There was no spiritual or emotional support. Such events turned a tomboy child into a serious adult at a very young age. She was often referred to as a little old lady. She was subjected to and witnessed mental, physical and emotional abuse of other youngsters and their families.

As the years passed, she felt there was no response from G-d. In hindsight she knows that there was indeed a response as she was surviving and living. But at the time she did not understand this as a response. She questioned whether this was a just G-d. Her immature view was of a G-d who responded directly with a yes or no through visible deeds. She would often inquire of her mother who had no answers. She was raised in a Kosher home where the father and brothers attended religious services only on the High Holy Days. She observed her mother sitting by the window on these holidays, reciting prayers from a book. This amazing, strong mother of eight children never gave up hope and sent her daughter for every new treatment, no matter how bizarre they seemed until one day, the daughter protested with tears and cried out - Let me be. Secretly, the daughter believed like the mother that one day she would walk but she could not take the constant disappointment in not finding a cure.

This was a family with many secrets. One secret that the daughter learned is that her mother believed strongly that she, the mother was being punished for a sin she committed. G-d punished her by taking it out on the daughter. The mother was in a battle with G-d. The daughter wanted to give up the struggle and was beginning to believe that indeed she was being punished - for what she did not know. And maybe G-d's response was a firm and resounding

"No, you will not walk again."

Life moved on securing university degrees, a career in social work and subsequently a marriage. One day, the grown up little girl took ill, almost died and required major surgery resulting in not being able to have children. To bear and raise not one but several children was her greatest desire. She wept and wept. She knew she would have been an outstanding mother. In looking back some lines from The Book of Job come to mind to describe this period and I quote:

1. My soul is weary of my life; I will leave my complaint upon myself
2. I will say unto G-d "Do not condemn me; show me wherefore thou contendest with me."
3. Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands, and shine upon the council of the wicked?
4. Hast thou eyes of flesh? Or seest thou as man seeth?
5. Are thy days as the days of man? Are thy years as man is days;
6. That thou inquierest after mine iniquity, and searchest after my sin?
7. Thou knowest that I am not wicked; and there is none that can deliver out of thine hand
8. Thine hands have made me and fashioned me together round about; yet thou dost destroy me.

She had known suffering and wanted to make it better for others. She came to believe that we are born into the world to make a contribution.

Gradually the depression lifted and life moved on. While the questioning of G-d went into the recesses of her mind, she noted a continuous unsettling feeling about the meaning of Judaism, the meaning of life. Is there really a G-d?

Once again, serious illness struck requiring surgery. She could not sleep the night before the operation; she stayed up the entire night reading Rabbi Kushner's book, "When Bad Things

Happen To Good People." After all, she saw herself as a good person. A friend had brought her the book. A feeling of calm took over as she emerged from the book with a beginning understanding that events happen for random reasons. This is not as simplistic as it sounds. But for someone who wondered about a sin equaling punishment as her mother did, the book made its point. It is not part of G-d's plan to make children suffer.

(I should say that the sin which subsequently became known to me was not really a bad sin.) The daughter was sad because the mother had died and the daughter could not bring her peace of mind. Yet, the mother had probably found this long sought peace of mind when she arrived in the other world and was greeted by G-d or G-d's messenger. She had been a good mother who did everything in her power to provide this daughter with a sense of normalcy. True, the mother's view of G-d as punishing had not been good for the daughter, but the daughter would have to find her own way which she was beginning to do through small bits of study.

So the years went by and this woman became a social worker, an advocate, a fighter for justice for all. She had known suffering and wanted to make it better for others. She came to believe that we are born into the world to make a contribution. Perhaps it is G-d's plan. He can-

not mend the world all by himself. This may sound a bit narcissistic and omnipotent but nevertheless she fought continuously for the welfare of others.

1992 brought a diagnosis of breast cancer to her. What amazed her was that there was no rage as she had experienced earlier. She took it in stride. Of course there was some sadness. She heard through the grapevine that others were saying: "Hasn't she suffered enough? Or

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Every human being is endowed by God with two eyes. With one she/he is expected to look at his/her neighbor, fastening his/her gaze on his/her virtues, his/her excellence, his/her desirable qualities. With the other eye, she/he is to turn inward to see his/her own shortcomings in order to correct them.

RABBI ISRAEL SALANTER
(1810-1883, LITHUANIA AND GERMANY;
FOUNDER OF THE MUSAR MOVEMENT)



Everyone must have two pockets, so that s/he can reach into the one or the other, according to his/her needs: In the right pocket are to be the words - "For my sake was the world created" and in the left pocket - "I am but dust and ashes."

HASSIDIC COMMENTARY
TO GENESIS 18:27, QUOTED IN
NAHUM GLATZER, TEN RUNGS.



Rabbi Nathan David Sidlovitzer, son of Rabbi Yerachmiel, said: "We read: 'As far as the East is from the West, so far has God removed our transgressions from us' (Psalm 103:12) When a person stands facing the East, s/he needs but a turning about to face West. Likewise a sinner needs but a slight mental turning-about to be far removed from transgressions."

QUOTED IN TIFERET BANIM,
BY J. K. K. ROKOTZ; WARSAW, 1911

there but for the Grace of G-d go I." While she appreciated their concern, they had it all wrong. Breast cancer did not come from G-d. And why would she be singled out! They are in the Grace of G-d and she is not. How can they make such statements!

The gnawing thoughts and feelings about life began to return. She was growing older - something was missing. She became a little too preoccupied with thoughts of death. She was not ready to die. She had not found all the answers. True one never has all the answers but some are essential in order to continue to live. She had not made sufficient peace with life. She began to study Torah with two other women who were knowledgeable. A new world opened as they dialogued together. An important and essential dimension of her very being became accessible. She purchased a few books, read, and the missing piece was located. This inner questioning, the childish demands of G-d that something be done to make her walk. Rabbis Lionel Blue and Jonathan Magonet in *The Little Blue Book of Prayer* state: "We work for the good of all G-d's creatures and society; that is the outer work. But we ourselves are also G-d's creatures and part of society and so we must work on ourselves too. That is the inner work of self-purification and prayer."

Her outer work was visible; the inner work of prayer needed much work. Ashamedly, she admits that she was concrete about G-d. She gave G-d a structure of another being. When she joined the Holy Blossom Temple and attended weekly services and weekly Torah study, she moved from a structure of G-d to knowing there is a presence that surrounds her at all times.

Many months ago a new thought took over - she does not need to walk like others. She would not know how to be, she would not know how to live. This is who she is. She has succeeded. She has made something of her life and she knows that G-d did intervene in helping her to realize that she take responsibility for her life.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said,

"Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."

Attendance at Temple for prayer and study has provided her with a sense of well being, control and comfort. She has been giving the guidelines on how to make her life better by behaving more G-d-like. In another year when she is called to the Torah for her Bat Mitzvah, she will become part of the ancients who are now shaping her life.

The little girl who is now an older woman knows that it is never too late to grow up Jewishly.

This woman does not want you to believe that life is hunky dory. Living with any kind of disability or illness is no easy task. She must be truthful and tell you that every once in a while when she is feeling down, isolated and alone she looks to the heavens and asks G-d to make it a bit easier. This piece of prose was composed during one of those moments.

*Last night I looked up into the
midnight sky
The moon was huge - round-
a pale yellow
And the stars shone brightly like
diamonds
I could not climb to the heavens
I could not walk towards the heavens
But my soul and heart touched the
heavens
The mind orchestrates soul and heart
Creates worlds of fantasy -
imagination and magic
An unforeseen force gives this
power to my legs
And I am transported beyond the
pain, the despair, the indignities
Of the world in which I sit
Always looking upward
Always being stared down at
Talked down at
When I cannot break loose
Cause no muscles -
no nerves will obey
I retreat to a world
Where paths are smooth
No steps exist, and doorways open up
Where I climb
Where I race
Where I am free*

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*We apologize if your name was omitted.
Please call so that we can include it in
the next issue.*

“Where is the dwelling of God?”
This is the question with which the rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting him. They laughed at him: “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of God’s glory?” Then he answered his own question: “God dwells wherever people let God in”. This is the ultimate purpose – to let God in. But we can let God in only where we really stand, where we live, where we live a true life. If we maintain holy intercourse with the little world entrusted to us, if we help the holy spiritual substance to accomplish itself in that section of Creation in which we are living, then we are establishing in this our place, a dwelling for the Divine Presence.

MARTIN BUBER, THE WAY OF MAN



Rabbi Pinhas said:
“When a person is singing and cannot lift his/her voice, and another comes and sings along, another who can lift his/her voice, then the first will be able to lift his/her voice too. That is the secret of the bond between spirit and spirit.”

“WHEN TWO SING” FROM MARTIN BUBER,
TALES OF THE HASIDIM : EARLY MASTERS



A person should always be yielding as a reed and not stiff as a cedar. Why? For the nature of a reed is that even should all the winds blow on it, they can’t uproot it from its place.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TAANIT 20B

It is narrated that there was once a wicked man who committed all kinds of sins. One day he asked a wise man to teach him the way of repentance in an easy manner, and the latter said to him: “Refrain from telling lies”.

He went forth joyful and glad of heart, thinking that the wise man permitted him to walk in the stubbornness of his heart as before. When he decided to steal, as had been his custom, he reflected: “What am I to do in case somebody asks me; ‘Where are you going?’ If I tell the truth: ‘To steal’, I shall be arrested; if I tell a lie, I shall transgress the command of the wise man”. In the same manner he reflected on all other sins, and repented with a perfect repentance.

JUDAH BEN ASHER , 13TH-14TH CENTURY TALMUDIST, GERMANY/SPAIN

Only a single person was created in the beginning, to teach that if any individual causes a single person to perish, Scripture considers it as though an entire world has been destroyed, and if anyone saves a single person, Scripture considers it as though a whole world had been saved. . .

MISHNAH, SANHEDRIN 4:5



“Redemption lies in remembering.”

BA'AL SHEM TOV (ISRAEL BEN ELIEZER TALISMACHER), 1698-1766;
INSCRIBED ON THE ENTRANCE TO
YAD VASHEM IN JERUSALEM



The past can be cancelled by a true cry from the heart to God and a return to His law. This holds not only for the annual reckoning, but to the last hour a man lives; so my grandfather taught me. He had in his Bronx apartment a lodger less learned than himself, and much fiercer in piety.

One day when we were studying the laws of repentance together, the lodger burst from his room. “What!” he said. “The atheist guzzles whisky and eats pork and wallows with his women all his life long, and then repents the day before he dies and stands guiltless? While I spend a lifetime trying to please God?”

My grandfather pointed to the book. “So it is written,” he said gently. - “Written!” the lodger roared.

“There are books and there are books!”

And he slammed back into his room.

The lodger’s outrage seemed highly logical.

My grandfather pointed out afterwards that cancelling the past does not turn it into a record of achievement.

It leaves it blank, a waste of spilled years.

A man had better return, he said, while time remains to write a life worth scanning. And since no man knows his death day, the time to get a grip on his life is the first hour when the impulse strikes him.

HERMAN WOUK, THIS IS MY GOD



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