Eyes Open and Eyes Shut : Thoughts for Rosh Hashana, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Senior Editor of its journal, Conversations.

Paul Gaugin, the famous 19th century French artist, commented: “When I want to see clearly, I shut my eyes.”

He was referring to two different ways of perceiving reality. With our eyes open, we see surface reality—size, shape, color etc. But with our eyes shut, we contemplate the context of things, our relationship to them, the hidden meanings.

With our eyes open, a dozen roses are 12 beautiful flowers. With our eyes shut, they may be full of memories and associations—roses given or received on our first date; roses at our wedding; roses growing in our childhood home's back yard; roses on our grandmother’s Shabbat table.

How we see fellow human beings is also very different with open or closed eyes. With our eyes open, we see their physical features. With our eyes shut, we remember shared experiences, friendships, happy and sad moments. When we want to see clearly—comprehensively—we shut our eyes.

Mircea Eliade, a specialist in world religions, has written in his book, The Sacred and The Profane, about the pagan view of New Year. For them, human life is a series of recurring cycles, always on the verge of chaos. On New Year, people descend into this primordial chaos: drunkenness, debauchery, chaotic noise.

The Jewish view is radically different. For Jews, reality isn’t a hopeless cycle of returns to chaos, but a progression, however slow, of humanity. Rosh Hashana is not a return to primeval chaos, but a return to God, a return to our basic selves.

Our New Year is observed with prayer, repentance, solemnity, and a faith that we can—and the world can—be better.

The pagan New Year is an example of seeing reality with open eyes. Things really do seem to be chaotic when viewed on the surface. Humanity does not seem to improve over the generations. We always seem to be on the verge or self-destruction.

The Jewish New Year is an example of viewing reality with our eyes shut, of seeing things more deeply, more carefully. While being fully aware of the surface failings of humanity, we look for the hidden signs of progress and redemption. We attempt to maintain a grand, long-range vision. This is the key to the secret of Jewish optimism. While not denying the negatives around us, we stay faithful to a vision of a world that is not governed by chaos, but by a deeper, hidden, mysterious unity.

The problem of faith today is not how to have faith in God. We can come to terms with God if we are philosophers or mystics. The problem is how can we have faith in humanity? How can we believe in the goodness and truthfulness of human beings?

With our eyes open, we must view current events with despair and trepidation. We see leaders who are liars and hypocrites. We see wars and hatred and violence and vicious anti-Semitism. We are tempted to think that chaos reigns. But with our eyes shut, we know that redemption will come. We know that there are good, heroic people struggling for change. We know that just as we have overcome sorrows in the past, we will overcome oppressions and oppressors of today.

Eyes open and eyes shut not only relate to our perception of external realities, but also to our self-understanding. During the season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we focus on penitential prayers. We confess our sins and shortcomings. But as we think more deeply about our deficiencies, we also close our eyes and look for our real selves, our deeper selves, our dreams and aspirations.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, noted that the high holy day period is symbolized by the shofar. The shofar must be bent, as a reminder that we, too, must bow ourselves in contrition and humility. But shortly after Yom Kippur comes Succoth, with the lulav as a central symbol. The lulav must be straight, not bent over. The lulav teaches us to stand strong and tall, to focus on our strengths and virtues. The holiday season, then, encourages us to

first experience humility and contrition; but then to move on to self-confidence and optimism. Our eyes are open to our shortcomings; but when we shut our eyes, we also can envision our strengths and potentialities.

Rosh Hashana reminds us to view our lives and our world with our eyes open—but also with our eyes shut. We are challenged to dream great dreams, to seek that which is hidden, to see beyond the moment.
Rosh Hashana is a call to each individual to move to a higher level of understanding, behavior and activism. Teshuva—repentance—means that we can improve ourselves, and that others can improve, and that the world can improve.

This is the key to Jewish optimism, the key to the Jewish revolutionary vision for humanity, the key to personal happiness.