

100
Jewish Things
to Do Before
You Die

Barbara Sheklin Davis



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“Behold, I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live.” Devarim 30:15

*With love to my husband, Leslie; our children,
Pamela, Phyllis, and John; their spouses, Steve, Mark, and
Lital; and our most beloved grandchildren,
Talia, Jack, Henia, Sam, Leora, Tama, Julia, Noam, and Ella*

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Introduction

Whether you're a Pew Jew or a New Jew, whether you consider yourself a salad-bar Jew or an aspirational Jew, whether you're Jewish or Jew-ish, this book is for you. A recent Pew survey reported that "American Jews overwhelmingly say they are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people." But the results also suggest that "Jewish identity is changing in America, where one in five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion."¹ The changing nature of Jewish identity is quite clear looking at generations: 93 percent of older Jews identify as Jewish on the basis of religion, and only 7 percent describe themselves as having no religion. In contrast, only 68 percent of young-adult Jews identify as Jews by religion, while 32 percent describe themselves as having no religion, instead identifying as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture.

Young Jews today are part of a generation that, as Dr. Jonathan Woocher has pointed out, "asks not how to stay Jewish, but how to be Jewish."² Inheritors of a long tradition of secularism in American Jewish life, Jews today are not only less religious but also much less connected to Jewish organizations and a Jewish lifestyle. Being Jewish isn't seen as a negative, but neither is it important. Young Jews are only half as likely to say that they feel part of a Jewish community or a special obligation to other Jews in need. Only a third of them with children say they're raising them as Jews.

But Judaism is the gift of a lifetime, a gift that keeps on giving. We often treasure when we are older what we didn't value when we were young. If Judaism has true and inherent worth, we cannot give up on it. But it is important to recognize that for many people today, as Jay Michaelson wrote in the *Forward*, the values are not meaningful. "They don't want a particularist identity in a multicultural age. They don't agree that there's merit in ghettoization, endogamy, or us versus them thinking. . . . For better or for worse, those are the clean slates from which we must begin."³

This book writes on that clean slate. It is a book unlike any other.

It doesn't mock, it doesn't preach, it is not a "how to" manual, nor is its purpose or tone didactic. It offers connections, of many different kinds, to many different aspects of Judaism, in the spirit of pluralism and welcome. Lighthearted yet authentic, it will show you ways that Jewishness can be meaningful and valuable in your life, something that you can experience with interest, intent, and joy. Maybe not all at once, and maybe not all together, but you can sample these ways with no obligation to buy. This book is a gateway drug to a more Jewish life.

Whether you find Jewish life applicable, appealing, or appalling, this book will help you learn more about it, in an open, nonjudgmental, non-coercive way. You can give this book for any or many occasions, as a Chanukah gift or for a milestone birthday. It will work for a graduation, wedding, anniversary, or even retirement. You can give it to a person who just wants to know more about Jewish life. Maybe even read it yourself.

1. Add a Jewish Object to Your Home

There are so many ways to add a “Jewish touch” to your home. You may already have some of these things, or you may have none. But no matter your taste, you will find something that will please your aesthetic sense as well as adding a special dimension to your décor.

Here is a list of some objects that make a home Jewish: *mezuzah*, *Shabbat* candlesticks, *Kiddush* cup, prayer book, Jewish calendar, *chanukiyah*, *tzedakah* box, *Havdalah* set, challah cover, Seder plate, *dreidel*, *mizrach*, Jewish art, Jewish books (if you bought this one, you’re already ahead of the game!), Haggadot, Jewish family heirlooms, *ketubah*, Miriam’s Cup, Jewish jewelry, Jewish cookbooks.

Why should you do this? “In Judaism and, I imagine, most other faith traditions, the spiritual is material,” Vanessa L. Ochs writes in a fascinating article entitled “What Makes a Jewish Home Jewish?” “Without things, in all their thingness, there is no Passover, only an idea of Passover; and a faint and fuzzy idea it would be, like honor, loyalty, and remorse—like, perhaps, God, and more surely, monotheism. Things denote one’s belonging, one’s participation, possibly one’s convictions.” She raises the question: “Could we consider the possibility that things in a Jewish home have Jewish identities, as solid, erratic, or angst-filled as the Jewish identities of people? For just as memory recovers lost, stolen, and rejected worlds and ways of being left behind, do not objects—those present, those retrieved, and even those dimly recalled—do the same?”¹

Adding a Jewish object to your home can be a meaningful and purposeful experience. Finding any of these things is easy; they are all available online, through synagogue gift shops, or (best of all) by going to Israel to shop. Perhaps one will enhance *your* lifestyle.



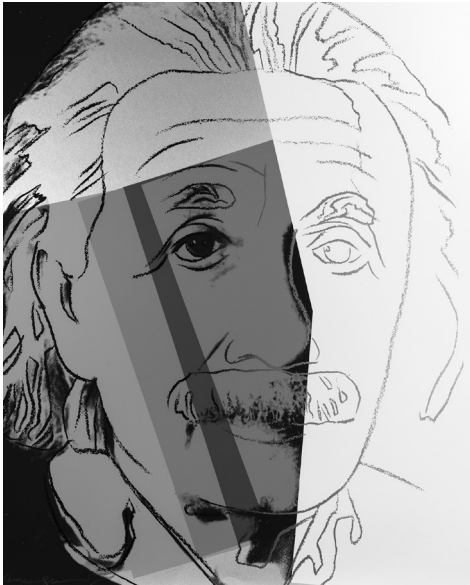
Shabbat candlesticks and Passover Seder plates are available in styles from traditional to modern and materials from silver to ceramic to plastic. You are certain to find one that speaks to you. (Joy Stember Metal Arts Studio image. Reproduced with permission.)

2. Admire Warhol's Ten Jewish Geniuses

Andy Warhol's *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*, created in 1980, depict illustrious figures of Jewish culture: actress Sarah Bernhardt, jurist Louis Brandeis, philosopher Martin Buber, physicist Albert Einstein, psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, composer George Gershwin, novelist Franz Kafka, the comedic Marx Brothers, prime minister Golda Meir, and novelist Gertrude Stein. Warhol referred to this pantheon of great thinkers, politicians, performers, and authors as his "Jewish geniuses."

When the collection was first exhibited, art critics acerbically called it vulgar, Jewploitative, offensive, and commercial. Warhol was accused of hypocritical pandering to wealthy Jews with little taste. His only comment was alleged to have been: "They'll sell."

While many saw the works as an extension of Warhol's other celebrity portraits, dismissing them as "business art" designed to make money for the controversial but highly successful pop artist, others disagreed, finding greater profundity in these portraits than in others he painted. While Warhol produced hundreds of commissioned



The series Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century was commissioned by dealer Ronald Feldman. They were first published as a portfolio of silk-screen prints on paper. Warhol then created additional versions as forty-inch-square silkscreen paintings on canvas. (Andy Warhol, Albert Einstein, 1980, From Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century, Screenprint, 40 x 32 inches, Photo: Casey Dorobek, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; © 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

portraits of celebrities, the exhibition of Jewish geniuses was different, because it featured people who were no longer alive and was based on archival photos that he enlarged, partially redrew, and overlaid with high-contrast colors.

Warhol, known for enigmatic commentary, is reported to have said that he chose his Jewish subjects because he liked their faces. Jewish communities embraced the *Ten Portraits* far more enthusiastically than did the critics. With time, there has been a revision in critical assessment as well.

Not many people know about these paintings, but if you are lucky enough to see the *Portraits* on exhibit, you are sure to admire them.

3. Attend a Passover Seder

“You shall tell your child on that day, saying, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” Exodus 13:8

The formulation of the commandment to tell the story of Passover is intriguing: it is clearly addressed to adults who are asked to tell their story of personal redemption to their children. As a guest at a Passover Seder, one is almost automatically in the position of the child to whom the story is being told. That being the case, asking questions (even the most basic) is entirely appropriate and welcome. In fact, asking questions is the reason for the Seder. The Four Questions (*Ma Nishtana*), asked by the youngest child, frame the entire service, asking, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

The Seder is celebrated much the same way by Jews around the world. At the same time, each Seder is unique, and each recounting of the Exodus story will likewise be different. Within the framework of the Haggadah (telling) lie multiple opportunities for digressions and questions. Some may be scholarly and profound and others worldlier, even political. Haggadot come in many stripes, from the traditional to the holistic. A multimedia Haggadah entitled *300 Ways to Ask the Four Questions: From Zulu to Abkhaz* allows one to share the feel of a Seder in Poland or Portugal or hear what the questions sound like in an African click language or Morse Code, Shakespearean English, or even Klingon.

Seder customs are likewise varied. A feminist may place an orange on the Seder plate, in response to an apocryphal rabbi who said, “Women have as much place on the pulpit as an orange has on a Seder plate.” Others place a tomato, symbolizing the mistreatment of migrant farm workers. Vegetarians substitute vegetables for shank bones and eggs. A Miriam’s Cup is sometimes used to honor the role of Miriam the Prophetess and highlight the contributions of women to Jewish culture.

Enjoy being a guest at a Seder. Bring flowers for your hostess (rather than food or wine) and relax and delight in new experiences. Ask as many questions as you want. The food (it will definitely arrive!) will be

delectable and special, and the singing will be joyous. Just know that the Seder doesn't conclude with the meal—part two follows dessert!



Anna London writes, “The seder is a work of literary art that uses text and music from across the centuries to fashion something new. It is something that provides a framework and a context for us, within which our aim isn’t merely to recount a story, but rather to remember an exodus of which we have no memory. The impossible task of remembering something we never experienced is much better achieved through methods that are meaningful.” (Four Questions, by Arthur Szyk [1894-1951]. Wikimedia Commons image. Reproduced with permission.)

4. Avoid *Lashon Hara*

“Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking lies.” These words conclude every *Amidah* prayer. Other prayers are written in the first-person plural; this one is written in the singular. It speaks directly to the one who is praying and delivers a tough message.

Lashon hara means “evil speech” and has long been defined as “gossip.” The twenty-first century has brought a new meaning. Social media has become antisocial media, and cyberbullying, sexting, flaming, stalking, outing, masquerading, and excluding have brought *lashon hara* into the digital age and the homes and lives of millions of people. The new *lashon hara* includes the following:

- ◆ Sending mean messages or threats to a person’s e-mail account or cell phone
- ◆ Spreading rumors online or through texts
- ◆ Posting hurtful or threatening messages on social-networking sites or web pages
- ◆ Stealing account information to break into someone’s account and send damaging e-mails
- ◆ Pretending to be someone else online to hurt another person
- ◆ Taking unflattering pictures of a person and spreading them through cell phones or the Internet
- ◆ Circulating sexually suggestive photos or messages about someone

Judaism is intensely aware of the harm that can be done through speech. A classic Chasidic tale illustrates the danger of *lashon hara*. A man was telling malicious lies about the rabbi. Later, realizing the wrong he had done, he went to the rabbi and begged forgiveness. “Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds,” the rabbi told him. Though this was a strange request, the man complied gladly. Then the rabbi said, “Now, go and gather the feathers, because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect the feathers.”

5. Bake Challah

The term “challah” refers to the piece of dough that was to be given to the priests from a kneading of bread in ancient times, according to the verse, “The first portion of your kneading, you shall separate as a dough offering [challah]. . . . In all your generations, give the first of your kneading as an elevated gift to God” (Numbers 15:20-21). Challah then evolved to mean the two loaves of bread that form the core of the *Shabbat* meal and, ultimately, the braided egg bread with which we are all familiar.

Challah can be made in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Braided challot may have three, four, or six strands. Three braids symbolize truth, peace, and justice. Twelve humps from two small or one large braided bread recall the miracle of the twelve loaves for the twelve tribes of Israel. Round loaves, baked for Rosh Hashana, symbolize continuity and may contain raisins, to assure a sweet year. Ladder shapes signify ascendance to great heights, and hand shapes are wishes for a good year. Small triangular loaves may be made for Purim; for Shavuot, challot may be shaped like the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Shapes are limited only by the baker’s imagination.

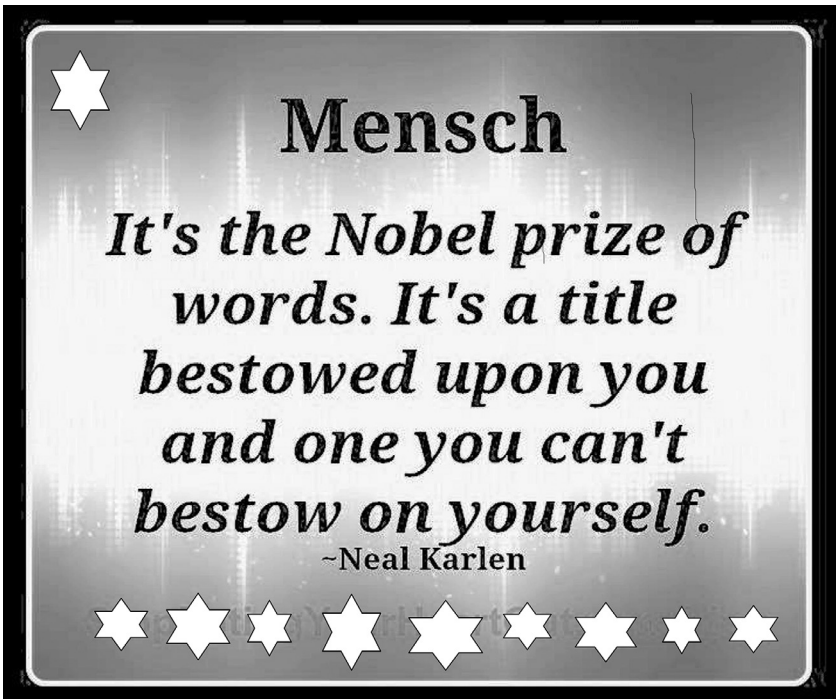
Then, just when you think you’ve seen it all, something brand new comes along. “Challahlujah!” trumpets www.challahhub.com, which proclaims it’s “not your mama’s challah.” It’s certainly not, with recipes for banana chocolate and peanut butter chip, vegan pretzel, pesto asiago, salted caramel, raspberry cream cheese, and mint chocolate chip challahs. If you really don’t want to do the baking and experience the warmth and delicious smells, you can always get a ChallahGram from www.challahgram.com, which promises to deliver a fresh kosher Brooklyn challah to you anywhere in the United States on Friday. Having conquered shapes, flavors, and sizes, challah makers turned to politics. There’s a rainbow gay pride challah and a patriotic red, white, and blue challah.

But no matter how you make it, the fact remains that challah is delicious, and homemade challah is the very best. Its soft texture, sweet taste, delectable aroma, and woven braid symbolize love and are the perfect reminder of manna falling from the heavens.

6. Be a Mensch

“Mensch” is a beautiful word; it has no translation. It’s Yiddish and is related to the German word *mensch*, which means “human being” or “man” in the general sense. But the Yiddish word is completely different. “Mensch” has no gender. It is a completely value-laden word. You know a mensch when you meet one, but words fail to describe exactly what a mensch is. Calling someone a mensch is the ultimate compliment, expressing the rarity and worth of that person’s qualities.

Guy Kawasaki, a (definitely not Jewish) Silicon Valley-based author, speaker, entrepreneur, and evangelist, has written a guide for entrepreneurs on how to be a mensch. Here are his guidelines:



A mensch is “someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character,” says Leo Rosten in The Joys of Yiddish. “The key to being ‘a real mensch’ is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous.” Being a mensch is the highest aspirational goal one can set for oneself and one’s children. (Words by Neal Karlen. Reproduced with permission.)

- ◆ Help people who cannot help you. You shouldn't care if the recipient is rich, famous, or powerful.
- ◆ Help without the expectation of return—at least in this life. What's the payoff? There doesn't need to be one, but the payoff is the pure satisfaction of helping others.
- ◆ Help many people. Menschdom is a numbers game. Don't hide your generosity under a bushel.
- ◆ Do the right thing the right way. A mensch would never cop an attitude such as, "We're not as bad as Enron." There is a clear line between right and wrong, and a mensch never crosses that line.
- ◆ Pay back society. A mensch realizes that he or she is blessed. For example, entrepreneurs are blessed with vision and passion, plus the ability to recruit, raise money, and change the world. These blessings come with the obligation to pay back society. The baseline is that we owe something to society—we're not doing a favor by paying back society.²

Kawasaki offers an exercise to try: It's the end of your life. What three things do you want people to remember you for?

7. *Bikur Cholim*—Visit the Sick

Bikur cholim, visiting the sick, encompasses a spectrum of activities that provide comfort and support to people who are ill, homebound, isolated, or otherwise in distress. *Bikur cholim* can include visiting patients in a hospital, rehab center, or nursing home; visiting the homebound; running errands for those who are ill or disabled; or maintaining contact with and providing reassurance to those in need.

You can also perform *bikur cholim* by bringing a meal to a family with a new baby or driving a senior to a doctor's appointment. You can purchase gift certificates from places that deliver food; you can call when you are going to the store to ask if you can pick up anything; you can deliver meals on wheels, care for a pet while the owner is in the hospital, call bingo at a senior-citizen center, or bring your guitar and entertain. There is no end to the ways *bikur cholim* can be done.



Bikur cholim can be done by oneself or as part of a group. Either way, it is a mitzvah. (Pixabay image. Reproduced with permission.)

Bikur cholim fulfills the biblical command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Many communities have *bikur cholim* societies (the custom dates back to the Middle Ages), but this is something you can do as an individual. In fulfilling this *mitzvah*, we enrich our own lives as much as the lives of those we visit.

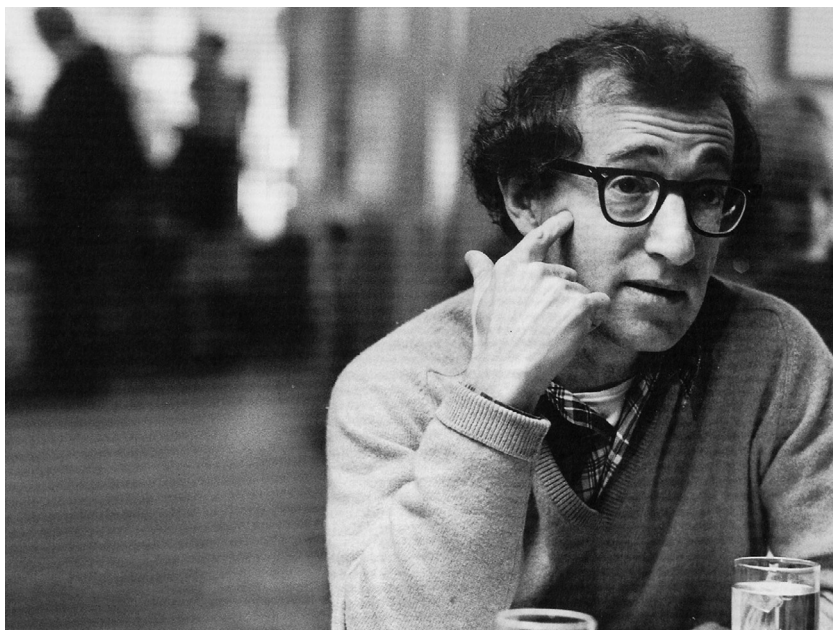
Sometimes people feel awkward about doing *bikur cholim*. What do I say? What do I do? Sometimes the answer is: nothing. You don’t necessarily have to say or do anything; your very presence and the fact that you care are enough.

Don’t let your discomfort or busy schedule stop you from being there for someone who really needs you. The worst thing you can do for someone who is sick is nothing. That is why Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub wrote, “Our generation, as those before and after us, will be judged by how we listen to those who are sick and vulnerable and to those who care for them. In the end, there is no them. There is only us.”¹

8. Binge-Watch Woody Allen

Woody Allen, born to parents of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, began his career as a joke writer, moved into standup comedy, and then became a filmmaker. Since his first movie, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* in 1966, he has written, directed, and frequently starred in about one film a year, both comedies and more serious films, with a variety of styles and subjects.

Film scholar David Desser writes, “Allen archetypically represents the American-Jewish artist in his reproduction of the absent tradition of American-Jewish art: Judaism. In fact, Judaism is the structuring absence of his mature films; his cinema is a constant working out of this missing link, a continual search for a substitute for Judaism.



Woody Allen “is the only independent filmmaker who has consistently worked for decades, making some wonderful films, some good films, and some bad films,” notes one of his biographers. “But he kept going and he is internationally beloved. There is no one else in his league. He has bedazzled the world with many indelible moments of romance, comedy, magic and even some morality tales.” (OpenCulture.com image. Reproduced with permission.)

Jewish artists often manifest this absence through the search for social justice or the participation in popular lifestyle trends.”²

Allen biographer David Evanier stresses, “It almost strains credulity that a Jewish comedian and film actor who placed his Jewishness front and center and consciously proclaimed it, utilizing constant references to his Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust, and with ambivalent ways of defining gentiles (white bread and mayonnaise were the most popular reference) could capture the imagination of and even beguile a huge audience as Woody Allen has done. Jack Benny, George Burns, Eddie Cantor, and Groucho Marx preceded him, but these were not comics advertising their Jewishness; it was implicit and polite. Borscht-belt comics were open about their ethnicities by the 1950s, but they were entertaining largely Jewish audiences. Allen was a national comic from the start.”³

But is Woody Allen good for the Jews? Is he even Jewish? In a fascinating column for Religion News Service entitled “Woody Allen, Jewish Despite Himself,” Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin lays out the many ways that Allen, despite his protestations, displays his Jewishness in his films, books, and standup routines, concluding: “On the one hand, there is the rejection of Judaism as religion. But there is the re-invention of Jewish identity as attitude—mostly of irony and iconoclasm.”⁴

Binge-watching Woody Allen will take quite a long time, but it is a unique, worthwhile, and rewarding Jewish experience.

9. Blow a Shofar on Rosh Hashana

Ashkenazi Jews use ram's horns as *shofarot*, because Abraham offered a ram on the altar instead of Isaac. Yemenites use kudu horns. Syrian Jews prefer a small, curly shofar, while Spanish and Portuguese Jews blow sleek antelope horns. A bent shofar symbolizes humility, but the straight shape was useful when Jews were forbidden to blow the shofar and hid it under their clothing.

Unless it's *Shabbat*, the shofar will be blown for a hundred blasts on Rosh Hashana. The shofar blower produces three sounds: *tekiah*, one long blast that ends on a high note; *shevarim*, three medium blasts



Rosh Hashana is not mentioned in the Torah. The holiday is described as a time of blowing the shofar. "Speak to the children of Israel saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a Sabbath, a memorial of blowing the horn, a holy gathering" (Leviticus 23:23-24). What's more, you don't have to blow a shofar on Rosh Hashana. You are just supposed to hear one. But why do things halfway? At the very least, trying to blow a shofar will make you more sympathetic toward the shofar blower you do hear. (PikiWiki Israel image. Reproduced with permission.)

together as long as a *tekiah*; and *teruah*, nine staccato notes. Then there is the Big *Tekiah*, or *tekiah gedola*, which everyone (including the shofar blower) hopes will last as long as possible.

Blowing a shofar is a matter of breath control and proper embouchure. Tighten the sides of your lips to make a small hole. Then blow air out so your lips vibrate, as if you were making a “raspberry.” Place the shofar where your lips vibrate the most and see if you can produce a sound. Then, as if heading to Carnegie Hall, practice, practice, practice!

A shofar can be purchased online, but if you can find a store that sells them, it is a good idea to try them out. The long twisty ones are very impressive but harder to blow. It is also difficult to get a good sound out of a very small one. A medium one with a quarter twist may be just right.

The shofar blast is a wakeup call, telling us that the time has come for us to change our lives, our communities, our world. Maimonides, the famous medieval Jewish physician and philosopher, wrote, “Arise from your slumber, you who are asleep; wake up from your deep sleep, you who are fast asleep; search your deeds, repent, and remember your Creator. Those of you who forget the truth because of daily trivialities, indulging throughout the year in the useless things that cannot profit you nor save you, look into your souls, amend your ways and deeds. Let everyone give up his evil way and his bad purpose.”