

How Can We Build a Life of Meaning?

Reflections on S'lichot

Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, editor of “A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism’s Sacred Path,” shares how S’lichot can inspire personal growth

By Dana Evan Kaplan - August 26, 2021



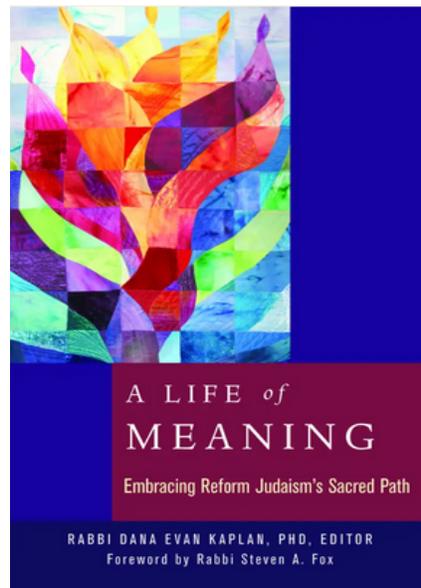
The *S'lichot* prayers are traditionally recited on the Saturday night before Rosh HaShanah to help prepare us for the soul-searching and transformation that we hope to do during the High Holy Days. *S'lichot* is thus the opening scene of our efforts each Jewish year to build a life of meaning, a life of consequence.

We want to break through the routines to which we have become accustomed. As we entered adulthood, we developed certain habits that served us well at the time. Some of these are still valuable practices that serve important functions for one reason or another, but many others are useless, pointless, or even counterproductive. Sometimes we develop workarounds that achieve what needs to be done in the moment but not necessarily in the best way. There is a story about a person who takes their car to a mechanic because the brakes aren't working. When they come back the next day, the mechanic tells them “I couldn't fix your brakes, but I made your horn louder.” Isn't that what we have often done when facing challenges in our lives? We did the best we could, patching things over in order to carry on.

Real change is hard. In fact, it's well-nigh impossible unless there is some sort of burning internal or external motivation. If the doctor were to say to us, “You have one year to live,” then we might go home and, after pouring ourselves a stiff drink, actually decide to change everything, living in a completely different way than we had been up to that point. There are other dramatic moments in life that can compel us to spontaneously reject everything that we have always done and move in a completely different direction.

Yet I don't think that *S'lichot* is trying to push us to impetuously change our lives 180 degrees in one evening. So don't trade in your Ford Explorer for a Porsche. Don't buy a plane ticket to India in order to spend the rest of

your life in an ashram. Don't book your seat next to Elon Musk to fly off to Mars. Rather, I would argue that what Judaism is asking us to do on *S'lichot* evening is to evaluate and reevaluate our lives in order to try to realize our full potential for lasting fulfillment.



Several years ago, I was the editor of a CCAR Press volume titled [*A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*](#). Our goal was to get people thinking about what Reform Judaism could mean in terms of how we find meaning in our lives. Though published before the pandemic started, the chapters remain timely and relevant. As we enter a reflective mode during this *S'lichot* season, I hope this book can inspire us to create positive change, both in our communities and in ourselves.

We are reminded by the words in the prayer book that we are granted the gift of life, a gift of uncertain duration but of certain laborious effort. However much we protest or negotiate, this short time is all we get. For many, fate overwhelms, truncates, or destroys their journey. To the best of our knowledge, this is the one life that we have, and we have a sacred obligation to make the most of it. And so, let us pray that this new year 5782 may be a year of wisdom acquired and shared, a year of virtue and the strengthening of our characters, a year of mitzvot and the meaningful practice of ritual, and a year of community and the sharing of our commitment to making the world a better place. May God's presence in our lives this new year strengthen our souls and renew our spirits.

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