# New Year(s), New Me?: Thinking About the New Year Jewishly

## compiled by Emily Rogal (MHWOW Jewish Life Specialist)

**Source 1: Lucille Clifton (1936-2010), *i am running into a new year* (Poem)**

i am running into a new year
and the old years blow back
like a wind
that i catch in my hair
like strong fingers like
all my old promises and
it will be hard to let go
of what i said to myself
about myself
when i was sixteen and
twenty-six and thirty-six
even thirty-six but
i am running into a new year
and i beg what i love and
i leave to forgive me

**Discussion:**

- What does (secular) New Years mean to you? What traditions, if any, do you have?
- How does Lucille Clifton relate to New Years? Does this feel resonant with your experience?
- What is the relationship to time that you see in this poem? How do you relate to this?
- How do you relate to ways you have changed this year? How does that make you think about the year to come?
- Why do you feel like it is important for some people to mark the new year?

**Source 2: Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1**

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| There are four new year celebrations, and they are:<br><br>The first of Nisan is the new year for kings and for festivals.<br><br>The first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of animals.<br><br>Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say: the first of Tishrei [also known as Rosh Hashanah]. The first of Tishrei is the new year for years, for shmitah[1] and jubilee years, for planting and for tithing vegetables.<br><br>The first of Shevat is the new year for trees, according to the words of Bet Shammai. Bet Hillel says: on the fifteenth of that month. | אַרְבָּעָה רָאשֵׁי שָׁנִים הֵם.<br><br>בְּאֶחָד בְּנִיסָן רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לַמְּלָכִים וְלָרְגָלִים.<br><br>בְּאֶחָד בֶּאֱלוּל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְמַעְשַׂר בְּהֵמָה.<br><br>רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְרַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמְרִים, בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרֵי. בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרֵי רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לַשָּׁנִים וְלַשְּׁמִטִּין וְלַיּוֹבְלוֹת, לַנְּטִיעָה וְלַיָּרָקוֹת.<br><br>בְּאֶחָד בִּשְׁבָט, רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לָאִילָן, כְּדִבְרֵי בֵית שַׁמַּאי. בֵּית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ: |

**<u>Discussion:</u>**

- Why do you think that Judaism has four different new years? What do you think the "purpose" of each of them is?
- How do you feel like these new years differ from the secular new year?
- What kind of relationship to time (and change) does having four new years offer us as Jews?

[1] Shmitah, the "year of release," occurs every seven years. It is a biblical command first mentioned in the book of Exodus, where the Israelites are commanded to forgive all debts, allow for agricultural lands to lie fallow, open private land holdings, and freely redistribute food storage and perennial harvests to make it accessible. Shmitah is still observed, though in a different capacity, in the modern state of Israel.

**Source 3: “Rethink your resolutions for the new year by making intentions instead” (*USA Today*)**

Jenny Koning, a therapist with virtual primary care and mental health platform PlushCare, says that if we don’t end up meeting or keeping up with that resolution we placed at the start of the year, more pressure can set in. Not only can resolutions contribute to this pressure, but they can also make people feel like failures by trying to reach unattainable goals. [...]

"Often, people have these vague resolutions like, 'I'm going to be happier,' or 'I want to be healthier,' but they're almost impossible to put into practice, because what does that really mean?" Morin says, adding this is what leads most resolutions to fail by Jan. 18. "People feel like they're failures or think that they're incapable or incompetent and give up and get frustrated until the following year when the cycle continues and they try to make another resolution."

Instead, Koning suggests shifting your mindset from resolutions to setting intentions, which "offers us a more enjoyable approach to creating lasting change regardless of the time of year."

"Resolutions can conjure feelings of good or bad and success or failure," she says. "Whereas, intentions offer us a place of compassion, growth and grace."

**Discussion:**

- How do you relate to the idea of New Years resolutions? Do you think they are helpful? Stressful? A combination?
- How does Judaism offer other ways of relating to the passage of time that are not resolution based?

**Source 4: Rabbi Debra Smith, "My Prayer for the New Year" (*Ritualwell)***

I am good at making resolutions, G-d, but I am not very good at keeping them.
There are so many things I would like to achieve, so many changes I would like to make.
I pray to You, G-d, for strength and for wisdom.
I want to live a meaningful life and discern my true path.
I want to understand why You have put me here.
Grant me insight, G-d.
Show me the person I have the potential to become.
Let me find my life's passion, G-d.
Teach me to resist temptation, to conquer self-destructive habits, to overcome selfishness and pettiness.
Guide me as I struggle to unbind the ropes that hold me back. Nurture me to fly free into your boundless Universe.
Help me grow in compassion for others, for myself, and to act with more mercy toward this aching fragile planet.
Give me the humility and the courage to repair relationships that pride has destroyed.
Show me how I can bring hope and healing into this world.
Gift me with good health, love, blessings and peace in this New Year.

**Discussion:**

- What are your intentions for the coming year?