Rosh Hashana Can Change Your Life (Even if You’re Not Jewish)

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Celebrating a new year — as Jews the world over will do this week, when Rosh Hashana begins on Friday at sunset — is all about making changes. It’s a time for new beginnings, for wiping the slate clean and starting over from scratch. In that spirit, on Rosh Hashana Jews say prayers and listen to readings that celebrate the creation of the world and of human life.

But Rosh Hashana also strikes a different, seemingly discordant note. Unlike so many other New Year’s traditions, the Jewish holiday asks those who observe it to contemplate death. The liturgy includes the recitation of a poem, the Unetaneh Tokef, part of which is meant to remind Jews that their lives might not last as long as they’d hope or expect. “Who will live and who will die?” the poem asks. “Who will live out their allotted time and who will depart before their time?”

And we’re not talking about a gentle death at the end of a reasonably long life; we’re talking about misfortunes and tragedies that can cut any of our lives short. “Who shall perish by water and who by fire,” the poem continues, “Who by sword and who by wild beast / Who by famine and who by thirst / Who by earthquake and who by plague?”

This focus on death might seem misplaced, bringing gloom to the party. But as a research scientist who studies the psychological effects of spiritual practices, I believe there is a good reason for it: Contemplating death helps people make decisions about their future that bring them more happiness. This is an insight about human nature that the rites of Rosh Hashana capture especially well, but it’s one that people of any faith (or no faith at all) can benefit from.

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