



A Spiritual Accounting

Retreats can help prepare for the Days of Awe

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During the month of Elul, which precedes the month of Tishrei and the Days of Awe, it is said that "the King is in the fields," that G-d is more accessible than at any other time of year. It is also a month where Jews have a unique opportunity to do a cheshbon hanefesh, to conduct a spiritual accounting, prior to doing teshuvah (repentance) during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So this Elul, I spent a weekend at the Hollyhock Retreat and Educational Centre on beautiful and remote Cortes Island, to take an inward journey, and to prepare for the Days of Awe.

Since I wanted to ensure that I arrived at Hollyhock before Shabbat, I took an Island Links bus from Vancouver early on Friday morning to Campbell River and caught a Corilair float plane from there (catching a ferry, a water taxi or the Cortes Connector are the other ways to get to Cortes from Campbell River). After an exhilarating 12-minute ride, we landed at Cortes Bay, where I was picked up by Bill, the centre's naturalist.

Once I arrived at Hollyhock, I knew I was in the right place to do a cheshbon hanefesh and ready myself for the holidays. One of the most serene places that I have ever been in my life, Hollyhock is nestled on a stunning 44-acre wooded property overlooking the ocean. The centre (which is named for the bright red hollyhocks growing in the garden) includes various spaces for contemplation, reflection, meditation and yoga including a garden, orchards, a nondenominational sanctuary, a lodge with a cozy dining room and a library. Hollyhock recently became a nonprofit foundation and the centre's founders and current leadership (chief executive officer Dana Bass Solomon and her husband and board chair, Joel Solomon) adhere to a tikkun olam philosophy, focusing on sustainability and being in harmony with nature, in addition to providing a space for reflection and learning. As well, the centre hosts world-class teachers exploring themes in wisdom and wellness, arts and culture, business leadership and social change.

As I glanced at the program schedule posted in the dining hall, I noticed that many of Hollyhock's usual programs were essentially about cheshbon hanefesh. I also noticed that two members of Vancouver's Jewish community, yogini Evelyn Neaman and author Gabor Maté were scheduled to conduct workshops at Hollyhock in the month of Elul.

The next day, I studied the Torah portion, had a Shabbat meal in my room and took a walk behind the centre's sanctuary to Smelt Bay Provincial Park. The park affords stunning views of the ocean and is a short walk from Hollyhock. It was the perfect place to meditate and reflect. I sat for hours thinking about what I needed to do to improve myself this year while gazing at the ocean and listening to the soothing sound of the waves.

At the beach and as I explored the area, I thought about the mistakes that I made during the past year and apologies that I would have to make to people that I had intentionally or unintentionally slighted, and jotted down a list in my notebook. Back in my light-filled room, I meditated on the Hebrew aleph-bet, studied a book of prayers compiled by Reb Noson (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's disciple) and contemplated the spiritual work that I would need to do so that I could achieve some long-term goals in the coming year, like making aliyah and meeting my basherte. My self-improvement plan includes deepening my connection to Judaism and Israel (by studying more Talmud, Torah and Hebrew), committing more money to tzedkah, trying to pray with deeper kavanah (intent), trying to do more gemilut chasidim (acts of loving kindness) and avoiding lashon harah (speaking ill of others). Achieving these goals won't be easy but this is all part of the process of cheshbon hanefesh – identifying the work that needs to be done and being accountable for one's actions.

On my last night at Hollyhock, I got a chance to talk to Neaman, director of the Tikkun Yoga Centre in Vancouver. She had just arrived and was at Hollyhock to conduct an Elul yoga retreat focusing on cheshbon hanefesh – essentially a mind, body and soul workshop. This was the first time Neaman was conducting a workshop there that incorporated themes from the month of Elul. According to Neaman, "I have personally used the month of Elul to guide my life for 16 years and I feel strongly about using Elul as a spiritual stock-taking and I think that Hollyhock creates the sacred space to do that." In addition, Neaman noted that, "The participants in this workshop will actually go through a process of looking at the different parts of their lives, their relationship to others and God at this time of year and to do the four step process of teshuvah, to return, so we will be learning about Maimonides and what he had offered in terms of a process to take us back to ourselves." The ultimate goal of the workshop, she added was to "clean out our inner house and get organized."

Admittedly, Cortes Island would be a challenging place to spend the High Holidays, but it is the perfect place to prepare. Being at Hollyhock allowed me to free myself from the stresses of day-to-day life. The beautiful surroundings, the healthy food, the friendly staff and the amiable folks that I met made it an appropriate place to do my cheshbon hanefesh. I still have a lot of spiritual work left to do before the holidays but my refreshing and reinvigorating stay at Hollyhock will help make Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur more meaningful this year.

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