

Taking Stock

An Introduction to Slichot

Program prepared by Amy Dorsch for USY

Materials:

Man in the Mirror song and lyrics on CD or I-pod (1 for every 2 people or on projector if possible, lyrics attached)
I-pod/Laptop and speakers
Heshbon Hanefesh Sheet (1 per person, copied back to back)
Pens/pencils (1 per person)

Note: this program is best done outdoors and at night but logistically, you would need to provide a tea light per person so that they can see in the dark. It can be very powerful in a camp setting at night if this is possible.

Goal (what they will do): To perform Heshbon Hanefesh (“accounting of the soul,” internal “housekeeping”) as we near *Slichot* and the High Holy Days.

Program lesson (what you want them to know by conclusion of program): As we near the High Holy Days, we begin a period of reflection and introspection. We look back on our year and the mistakes we’ve made and take stock on how we’d like to improve for the year ahead. Change is hard, but change is necessary. To grow and change, we must first take an honest look at ourselves.

Enduring Understanding (the take-away, beyond the hour-long program): Change starts with us. To improve our relationships and make the world a better place, we must take an honest look at ourselves and the changes we first need to make within.

Length: Approx. 1 hour

Step 1: I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change

Explain: The summer is almost over. You’re about to start a new school year, a new Jewish year. There’s a lot to look back on as you start fresh.

How many of you think you’ve changed in some way this year?

There’s a hilarious musical off-Broadway called “I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change.” Why do we relate to this? Because the people in your life love you for who you are, but no one’s perfect! There is always room for growth. When you look in the mirror, what changes do you think you can make? If you could take one honest look, what would you see and what would you want to see differently? This “internal housekeeping” or accounting of the soul is called **Heshbon Hanefesh** in Judaism. Michael Jackson sang about the importance of Heshbon Hanefesh for all of humankind in his popular song “Man in the Mirror.”

Step 2: Hand out copies of “Man in the Mirror.” Ask them to read the lyrics as you play the song and think about the meaning behind the song in general with a particular focus on the bolded text.

Step 3: Discuss key ideas in the song. What message does this song send?

- Self reflection
- Be the change/change starts with you
- Honesty with who you really are
- make yourself a better person to better the world

Step 4: Introduce concept and activity:

You may ad lib or use your own explanation but it should include some of these ideas and connect to the activity.

Explaining Slichot: During the month of Elul, we prepare to enter the intense season of the Yamim Nora'im when we “take stock” of our past actions and commit to self-improvement. We admit to our errors, repent or do T'shuvah and hope that in doing so, will begin our new year on the right foot. This whole process begins with Slichot. Slichot (prayers of penitence) usually take place the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah (with at least four days to RH). Slichot are solemn. Together, we express to God that we will “search our ways and probe deeply into our deeds, so that we may return unto [God].” Slichot prayers focus on God's mercy and on God's forgiveness. The idea of this service is do a little bit of self-investigation, introspection and “internal housekeeping.” We admit to our imperfections (for example, the *Ashamnu*, an alphabetical list of wrongdoings we have committed is recited at Slichot), evaluate our past year, analyze our sins and failures and commit to self improvement and growth in the upcoming year, always aiming for righteousness.

Step 5: Introduce Activity

Explain: “To know where you're going is to know where you've been.” We're going to use this opportunity, since Slichot is just around the corner, to look back in order to look ahead.

Instructions: You will have a chance now for reflection and self evaluation. The only requirement is to be as honest with yourself as possible. You can't improve if you don't admit to what needs improvement! No one will see this but you. This activity is similar to quizzes you find in magazines such as determining your personality type or whether you prefer the outdoors or indoors. Through this activity, you will do a Heshbon Nefesh, an accounting of the soul, and will look back on who you are and your past actions. Instructions are provided for you on the handout. This is a solitary activity. You will only get out of it, what you put into it. Before we re-assemble try to use the activity to come up with one possible commitment you can make to self-improvement.

Note to facilitator: There are two types of Hesbon Nefesh activities provided. One is in quiz format and the other is in ranking format. Both include a "Who Am I" preliminary exercise. You may choose which one to use. Hand out pencils and Hesbon Hanefesh sheets. Ask them to each find their own space and they will be called back after a bit of time.

-----allow about 20 min for activity----

Step 6: Re-assemble as a group for discussion

- How did this exercise feel?
- Did you struggle with it at all? Did you find a certain area or example particularly relevant?
- Did it help you recognize your past actions and impact your future behaviors? How?
- What did you realize that you didn't before? Did it give you any insight into who you are or how to lead yourself in a different direction?
- How did this exercise help you admit to your errors or necessity for behavior modification? Did it motivate you to commit to any particular behavior change? Is there one particular area where you could make an honest commitment to behavioral change? Please share. The next step is to think about how to do this. Slichot allows us to first acknowledge our errors and the need for change. Figuring out how to do this is up to us!

Step 7: Summarize and Conclude

Sample Sikkum (you can ad lib, add your own thoughts depending on the responses from the discussion)

Change is hard. The High Holy Days teach us that we are not perfect, but we commit to change and self improvement. In order to self improve, we must first know ourselves and acknowledge our actions, as you just did.

Hopefully, this exercise will have given you the opportunity to know where you've been in order to know where you're headed. Although it was an individual exercise, just like on High Holidays and Slichot, we participated in this activity together as a community. None of us is perfect but together, we commit to change. On Slichot (in a week or two), think about your behaviors this year and whom they may have impacted. Recognize the errors of your ways with specific examples and consider how you may modify your behavior in certain categories of your life and commit to improvement to start the year off right.

Heshbon Hanefesh

Step 1: Who am I?

Do you know who you are before you judge your actions? As you consider your actions, think about whether they represented who you are.

My strengths:

Areas for improvement (write what you think and then leave one line blank to fill in after you've done the next exercise):

Where I focus most of my energy and time (what I value or prioritize):

I would describe myself as:

How I think others see me:

How I want others to see me (if I heard someone talking about me, what would I want to overhear them saying?):

What frustrates me or makes me "tick:"

What motivates or inspires me:

Heshbon Hanefesh

Step 2: Taking Stock

FORMAT A: QUIZ FORMAT

Circle or check those that apply to you:

Category 1: Family

- a. I have a solid relationship with my parents. We interact with respect and admiration
- b. My siblings are my God-given best friends. I've been really good to my siblings and have tried to minimize conflict between us. I admire my siblings
- c. I spend time with my grandparents (whatever time I can get) and let them know how much I value them in my life. I call them frequently.
- d. I do my part around the house and not just when I am asked.
- e. Family functions trump hanging out with my friends. It's important to be present at celebrations and events.
- f. Add your own – have you shown commitment to family somehow this year?

Category 2: Friends

- a. I have defended someone against bully behavior
- b. I have stood by a friend during a tough time, illustrating loyalty
- c. I have opened myself up to new friends
- d. I have avoided "friends" who aren't positive influences
- e. my friends and I share common interests
- f. I have friends in different social circles (school friends, camp friends, USY friends)

Category 3: School

- a. Homework takes precedence over anything else after school. I just get it done
- b. I ask for academic help when I don't understand something
- c. I try my best to treat my teachers with respect
- d. I have academic or college oriented goals
- e. I give back to my school or am involved in a school related activity
- f. Schoolwork or academics is rarely a topic of dispute at home

Category 4: My Community

- a. I give back to my community/service to the community
- b. I am part of my community or am involved with my community through sports or something else.
- c. I feel at home where I live
- d. I know my neighbors (many people don't!)
- e. I appreciate my surroundings and make use of my neighborhood (example: I hang out at the park near my house)
- f. I am an active member of the Jewish community specifically

Category 5: the World

- a. I read the newspaper or online news. I am a concerned citizen
- b. Israel needs me. I often act in support of Israel
- c. I advocate or am invest an interest for a particular cause
- d. I care for the Earth through deed and action
- e. Other cultures interest me
- f. It is important for me to see other parts of the world when I have a chance to travel

Results: You can take stock of your priorities or necessary behavioral changes by noting the areas with checkmarks or circles. Is there an option that doesn't have a checkmark or circle that after thinking about it is important to you? Use the unchecked or not circled options as a guide to self improvement. You should be able to use this list to gauge your own self improvements as you admit to your errors (or misuse of priorities) and commit to change. Using this list as a gauge, which behavior do you feel could use some work? Which category needs to be your focus? On the last line of "areas for improvement" on the reverse, write where you feel you could adapt your behavior based on the results of this exercise.

Evaluating My Actions—A Heshbon Nefesh Exercise

FORMAT B: RANK FORMAT

During *Slichot* and again during the High Holy Days, we recite the *Ashamnu*, a collective admittance of past wrongdoings. Like the *Ashamnu*, this list recalls common wrongdoings. Read the list and evaluate your past actions by ranking each item: 5 is most relevant to me and 1 is least relevant. Flip over the page to analyze your results.

Action	5	4	3	2	1
At times I've avoided a difficult or painful situation because I didn't want to deal with it					
I am often not able to recognize my error where and when it occurs and fix it on the spot.					
I know that my life is mine to make, yet much seems beyond my control. This bothers me.					
I may not be aware of the wrongs I've done.					
I keep making the same mistake					
I refuse to tell told the person I wronged what it was that I did.					
I've been insincere in my responses to others.					
I've done the wrong thing, knowing it was the wrong choice					
I've done things to others that I would not want done to myself.					
I've done wrong under pressure or stress because I didn't know how to deal with it					
I've expressed sorrow for my actions, but only when I felt it might prevent worse consequences.					
I've let friendships deteriorate because I haven't tried ease the pain of the hurt I caused					
I've not helped when I could.					
I've said "I will" but then didn't.					
I've said: "I won't" but then did.					
I've thought of doing the right thing, but not acted on my thoughts.					
I've thought: "Since I can't complete it, I won't bother to start."					
Sometimes, even though I sincerely try to change my ways, I fall back into old patterns of behavior.					
There's something I didn't do, and now I'm ashamed of it.					
When I express sorrow for the wrongs I've committed, it is because of fear of consequences					
When I share with others the fact that I've done wrong, I find that we all share the same experience and grow together.					

Totals:

Add up your total.

High: You've got work to do! Now is the time to recognize your errors and commit to change and righteousness. Where in particular did you score higher? Commit to those changes first. You can't commit to perfection, it won't work!

Low: Way to go! You've had a great year but check where you may have had a higher number and focus on making changes in that area. Be sure that you were truly honest with yourself.

How can you use this exercise for self improvement and positive change?

This exercise made me realize that:

Change may scare me but one change I can commit to as I start my new year is:

"Man In The Mirror"
Michael Jackson

I'm gonna make a change,
for once in my life
it's gonna feel real good,
gonna make a difference
gonna make it right . . .

As I turn up the collar on my
favorite winter coat
this wind is blowin' my mind
I see the kids in the street,
with not enough to eat
who am I, to be blind?
pretending not to see
their needs
A summer's disregard,
a broken bottle top
and a one man's soul
they follow each other on
the wind ya' know
'cause they got nowhere
to go
that's why I want you to
know

I'm starting with the man in
the mirror
I'm asking him to change
his ways
and no message could have
been any clearer
**if you wanna make the world
a better place**

**take a look at yourself, and
then make a change**

I've been a victim of a selfish
kind of love
it's time that I realize
that there are some with no
home, not a nickel to loan
could it be really me,
pretending that they're not
alone?

a willow deeply scarred,
somebody's broken heart
and a washed-out dream
(washed-out dream)
they follow the pattern of

the wind, ya' see
cause they got no place
to be **that's why I'm starting with
me**

I'm starting with the man in
the mirror (ooh!)
I'm asking him to change
his ways (ooh!)
and no message could have
been any clearer
**if you wanna make the world
a better place
take a look at yourself and
then make a change**