...Nor Iron Bars a Cage

Setting our Intention for the New Year

Rosh Hashanah 5773

Contemporary Service
I’m going to share something that happens to rabbis in the month of Elul. Many of us develop what I have termed (it’s a long name) “if it-happened, and/or if someone said it, it just might be the germ of a high holy day sermon.” So, be careful what you do and say around rabbis in the month leading up to the high holy days...you never know....

With this phenomenon in mind, you won’t be surprised to hear that I thought of this sermon, which wasn’t yet complete, when I heard a spot on the radio about the recent Moth event held in Pittsburgh.

The Moth is an acclaimed not for profit organization dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling. The Moth events sell out across the country, and the stories told at live events are downloaded by millions each month. The rules for the contest are simple: in five minutes or under, tell a true story without using notes. A current theme for the StorySlams, as they are called, is Unintended.

I actually haven’t yet heard one of the stories based on this theme, but it makes sense that storytellers would share thoughtful stories, beautifully, poetically, sometimes humorously, told; stories which conclude with lessons learned, or possibly some kind of good, all of which arose unintentionally from a series of events.

When I heard the topic for the show that would be in Pittsburgh last week, it passed through my High Holy Day rabbi filter and I concluded that, while interesting, the theme “Unintended” is decidedly NOT a Rosh Hashanah message.
In fact, I would go so far as to say that “Unintended” is an anti-Rosh Hashanah message.

*Because Rosh Hashanah is all about intention.*

What happens unintentionally can be made meaningful—every day we are called upon to find meaning in random or ordinary occurrences—whether they be joyful, challenging, or devastating. But on Rosh Hashanah we stop for a whole day and imagine what might be if everything we did—if everything that happened to us, if every decision we made—were within our control.

On Rosh Hashanah we set our intentions for the year. We ponder and we pray, we discuss, we carefully consider what we want this new year to look like. Jewish tradition calls this teshuvah—returning to our best, our truest, selves.

So what does that mean for you? What do you want this year to look like? Rabbi Hertz has just begun tennis lessons. Her teacher explained to her that the ball will go wherever she tells it to. I’m out of my league here, but there must be dozens of details that go into a tennis swing—all of which influence where the ball will go. That simple, brilliant teaching, that the ball will go wherever we tell it to, applies to our lives as well, and it brilliantly echoes Jewish teachings about intentionality.
In Genesis 16 Hagar, who will become the mother of Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, runs away from Sarah. An angel finds her by a spring of water in the wilderness and says,
From where have you come? And where are you going?

Rosh Hashanah carries that same sacred message: at this moment, in these first precious and open, vulnerable, and exhilarating moments of the new year when everything is possible, we ask ourselves: where are we going?

The answer, simply: back to our best, our truest selves. Teshuvah: return to your best, your truest self.

Yes! You say, that’s what I want. I want to change, to grow, to try something new, to be more disciplined, generous, to be a better friend or family member or partner....

Yes! But! You say (and I hear myself saying), I can’t or but first I need to, or this thing or this other thing is in my way.

Let me tell you a story:
This is the legend of Mohini, the regal white tiger who, in the 1960’s, lived in the National Zoo in Washington D.C. Day in and day out, Mohini paced back and forth in her 12 foot by 12 foot cage, until the zoo created an outdoor park for her, composed of hills and trees and a pond. In her new home, Mohini immediately marked off a 12-by-12 foot square for herself, and paced there until her death.
Although she was a magnificent, powerful creature, Mohini was convinced her “place” was just a 12-by-12 foot square.

The poet Richard Lovelace, in “To Althea, from Prison” reminds us: “Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage.” You and I are, thankfully, not imprisoned. But we might be stuck behind stone walls or iron bars—stuck there because we stuck ourselves there. To begin this year we set an intention to free ourselves from our own self-imposed cages, our narrow prisons.

Yes! You say, but...
But, you say (and I hear myself saying), my life is fine, really. I might not be doing what I really want to do, I might not be living as fully as I would like to be...maybe there are things that aren’t working, but it’s all good. I’m fine.

The High Holy Day liturgy knows this mentality. It has heard our excuses, our rationalizations. And this is how it responds: Who will live and who will die? Who by fire and who by water?

About these words, the opening phrases of the prayer known as Unetaneh Tokef, Rabbi Noa Kushner\(^1\) writes that liturgy is not just printed words; it is experience, our real-life experience: this year some of us will physically make it through the year and some of us will not. The prayer is a stark and harsh and unrelenting

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\(^1\)“From Text to Life to Text: The Unataneh Tokef Feedback Loop,” in *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, editor.
reminder of our mortality. It tells us that what we are after everything else is stripped away, what we are... is human.

Rabbi David Wolpe\(^2\) teaches this lesson using King David, one of the most complex and interesting leaders our people has known:

> In the Bible, David is vital, alive—the most vibant of all biblical figures. He is a warrior, a lover, a sinner, a poet, a harpist, a forerunner of the messiah. Throughout the book of Samuel we see in David a man filled with the zest and brio of life. Yet when we open the book of Kings, David is an old man; shivering in bed, he cannot even keep himself warm. The first verse of the book reads, “King David was now old, advanced in years” (1 Kings 1:1). One chapter later, the Bible reads, “David was dying” (1 Kings 2:1). The Rabbis notice a significant difference in those two verses. When he is old, he is still called King David. When he is dying, he is simply David.

At critical times in our lives we are often, like David at the end of his life, simply human—and most aware of our truest selves.

I recently heard a story about the people of Pittsfield, Vermont that illustrated this principle. Life in Pittsfield, population 450, was turned literally upside down last summer by the wrath of Tropical Storm Irene. The flood and storm damage town was described by reporters as resembling a war zone; Pittsfield residents were completely cut off from the rest of the world.

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One woman, who lost almost everything that day, made this wonderfully insightful statement: “the magic part was that we weren’t our jobs, we weren’t our cars, we weren’t our belongings (some of us had no belongings). We weren’t what we did for a living....”

Like a storm, a break up, a near-miss, a devastating illness, like the awareness of our mortality, the Unetaneh Tokef is unrelenting and unsettling. We are not our titles, our degrees, our clothing, our friends, our high schools or colleges. We aren’t our cars, our belongings, our jobs. On Rosh Hashanah we strive to return to what and who we really are, who we are at our core.

Just a few weeks ago, astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first person to walk on the moon, died. And, while I didn’t do an exhaustive search, but my hunch is that every article about him from that historic moment in 1969 until and including his obituary, included the words he spoke upon setting foot on the moon’s surface. Armstrong's words are usually given as, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Clearly the event was of huge significance and the choice of words was deliberate.

Armstrong maintained for some time later that he said "for a man" rather than "for man." That ("for a man") was what he, with the help of his wife, had prepared in advance. The rather fuzzy tapes of the event aren't clear enough to be sure, although the 'a' does appear to be missing. Ironic, that the unintended

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3 State of the Re-Union radio program on Vermont: The Small Town State (http://stateofthereunion.com/home/season-3/vermont)
version of the phrase, the one heard by the world, has been called the most famous statement ever uttered.

But for us on Rosh Hashanah, it is Armstrong’s intended words—one small step for a man—that are of real value: each of us can take one small step today:

- One small step outside the stone walls and iron bars constructed of unhelpful, self-limiting thought, beliefs and behaviors.
- One small step toward our best and truest selves.
- One small step into the new year.
- One small step, with vast intention.

We close with words from Psalm 118:24—words many of you know and love: *Zeh hayom asah Adonai, nagilah v’nism’cha vo*—This is the day the Eternal One has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it.

We stand on the edge of a new year, ready to cross the threshold into what will be. Our tradition invites us to step forward with love and with joy—to know there will be challenges and blessings, times of sorrow and celebration.

And from this mysterious unfolding of time, the psalmist sings:

This is your life right now.

This is it.
Turn and be present.

Turn toward joy.

Turn and give thanks.

Return to your best, your truest self.⁴

We stand on the edge of the New Year with each other and with all of creation. Each one of us takes one small step—with vast intention.

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⁴ Very slightly adapted from Shana Tova: This is the Way, Rabbi Yael Levy