

Shana tova.

It is really truly wonderful to be here with you tonight. From the moment these chairs and stage have been set up, I haven't stopped smiling. I've missed seeing you and am so glad that you're here.

I know it's not how I typically start sermons, but it's almost fall, the air is sort of crisp, and the Red Sox are in the hunt for a playoff spot... so let's talk about baseball.

Perhaps more than any other sport, baseball is known for giving players second chances. Joining a new team - playing with new teammates and coaches, with different fans and unfamiliar surroundings - can often provide the shake-up that a player needs to turn around a season. While some are quick to credit locker-room chemistry or a different manager, often it is simply the fresh start, the chance to reset, that provides the biggest boost.

So it shouldn't surprise you that throughout Major League Baseball history there are many dozens of cases where a player was abruptly traded mid-season and ended up drastically changing his fortunes.

I want to tell you a story about a certain shortstop that you might remember. He was a fan favorite but a defensively-challenged player in a

position where defense is particularly important. On the last day in July, MLB's trade deadline, Nomar Garciaparra was sent to the Chicago Cubs, as part of a 4-player trade that gave the Red Sox Orlando Cabrera.

Sox fans were livid. Cabrera might have had a strong defensive record, but he was mediocre at the bat. For him we gave up Nomahhh??

What came next, though, shocked the baseball world: Cabrera not only continued to be a superior fielder, but also managed to outhit Nomar over the remainder of the season. In fact, he produced at All-Star level and led his team to the second-best record in the league, a Wild Card playoff berth, and a date with destiny as the World Champions.

Cabrera's turnaround shocked many, but not Hengchen Dai (Hungchen Dai), a researcher from UCLA who studies fresh starts. Mid-season trades provided a consistent view into externally imposed new beginnings, as they are typically not anticipated or desired by players.

After examining 700+ mid-season trades between 1974 and 2014, she noticed a fascinating trend. Players who were traded while performing worse than average tended to do better once with a new team - more often than was statistically likely. But players who were traded while playing well experienced a dip in their performance more often than expected.

Even more curious is this: those surprising trends only held when the players switched leagues, from the American League to the National League, or vice versa. When that happens, a player's statistics are recorded separately before and after the trade; otherwise, when they are traded within the same league, they simply keep their stats. This means that a player who is traded from the American League to the National League truly gets a fresh start - both in the record books, and also in his mind, and the minds of coaches, teammates, and fans. In a way, he gets to reinvent himself - in the middle of the season - as a better player, without the baggage of any prior games. He is, effectively, wiping the slate clean with new stats and a new record.

There is a Jewish aphorism that says שינוי מקום שינוי מזל - a change in your place (or your situation) becomes a change in your luck. That is to say, one change can produce a domino effect, often for the better. I'm pretty sure this phrase wasn't written for Orlando Cabrera... but....maybe Theo Epstein was remembering something he learned in Hebrew School when he sealed the deal that fateful day in July.

It has been a year and a half since we first experienced this world-altering pandemic and all the lifestyle changes that came with it. For some of us, the enforced quiet provided a welcome relief from the daily tedium we had

come to expect and resent: a twice-daily commute; small talk by the water cooler; or the pressure to socialize. Once the pandemic laid bare our best-laid plans for pretending we lived the perfect life, we could take stock of our lives and truly assess our priorities. It taught us that we weren't the only ones sitting on our couch watching Netflix on a Saturday night instead of *living la vida loca*; and that knowledge gave us permission to enjoy our guilty anti-social pleasures with that much less guilt. For others, though, the sudden quarantine felt more like house arrest; with nothing open and everyone fearful, that same couch became the setting for our own personal Groundhog Day, as we doom-scrolled through Facebook and physically felt our anxiety levels rise.

So it stands to reason: if we had such diverse experiences of the pandemic, we will likewise have a variety of reactions to our (hopefully) inevitable reentry into society. Even though the return to normalcy is less sudden than the shut-down was, it is still another **externally-imposed interruption** to our daily lives - another in what feels like an endless series of them.

The question, friends, is this: before this interruption, were we playing well or were we playing poorly? Did the pandemic upend our positive momentum - or was it a welcome chance for a restart? The best way to answer that is to think about how you felt after the initial shock of the change. First, set aside the panic of being shut down - and for some of us,

being shut IN with one or more tiny humans! Now think back: did you feel a sense of relief at the cessation of “life as usual,” or was your reaction more akin to profound disappointment? When the frenetic pace of life slowed from a mighty river to a trickle - did you indulge in more things that brought you joy, or fewer? Did you revel in endless days without needing to dress to impress, to put on a happy face, to present to the world a version of yourself that wasn't always *you*? Or did you watch the hours, the days, the weeks tick by, waiting for your chance to be with people once more?

Without a doubt, I have missed you... but I am confident when I say that Covid has allowed me to appreciate my life in ways that I simply didn't before the shutdown. Instead of living life for the future, I felt forced to prioritize simple joys - and in doing so, I noticed that these new habits, hobbies, and interactions brought pleasure to my life in new ways.

Any life-altering experience will alter priorities. But for many of us, this pandemic brought into stark focus just how out of touch we were with exactly who and what we want to be. Some of us found (or re-found) new hobbies - as evidenced by the art show in the Lang Galleria. Some of us came to the realization that the forced quiet time with our families was actually better than the chaotic circus of the lives we were living before. And some of us realized that we depended on our village far more than we ever knew - and life without them was a tough pill to swallow.

Tomorrow morning we will blow the shofar and we will follow the shofar notes with the declaration, *HaYom HaRat Olam* - “today the world stands as at birth.” HaRat is from the same root as הורים (“parents”) and הרים¹ (“mountains”), and Rashbam contends that this was not accidental. Our parents – and their parents before them – are the mountains upon which we stand² and grow. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the world is pregnant with possibilities - both the big world out there, and our tiny individual worlds. Those worlds are pregnant with hope for a better life, with optimism that we will do great things, and with ambition to be better people. We anticipate great things from this unborn world - and we know that it is our responsibility to shape it into the world in which we want to live.

Every Rosh Hashanah, we are given the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start anew. This Rosh Hashanah, in particular, is a new beginning for us. We are full of possibilities. Our families, our communities, this synagogue are all bursting with potential.

This year, we are all being given a fresh start - even though it was not one that we wanted. Let us use it to rebalance our worlds, to birth a reality and a community that matches our dreams. If your life (or community) was in a bit of a slump before the pandemic, let us use this moment to clear the

¹<https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/3178-2/>

² <https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/3178-2/>

stats and start over. If you were on a hot-streak, recognize that getting back there will take more work on your part, but it IS possible.

I'll even go so far as to say this, like a player that has switched leagues, we're given the opportunity to start over - both because it is Rosh Hashanah and because of our time apart. Let us make the most of this opportunity for a fresh start in this Harat Olam, this new world pregnant with possibilities.

Shana Tovah.