

Shana Tova.

I've written and rewritten this dvar torah intro a minimum of 4 times. I played with ways to ease into the topic. I looked for a kitschy story. I wrote a personal anecdote that turned out to be terribly boring. My husband wrote an intellectual intro that I totally nixed - and more - until I decided that you didn't need all that.

This morning's dvar torah is a participatory conversation, both as a kahal and in small groups. I'm asking you to share something of yourself, and in doing that I'm trusting that you know each other well enough to feel comfortable sharing and also being an attentive listener. Some of the things you hear in the coming minutes will be shared with trepidation - please keep in mind "V'ahavta l'reyacha kamocho", love your neighbor as yourself, as you listen respectfully and share thoughtfully.

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Year after year, millions of Jews sit in synagogues across the country on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and make promises to themselves and to God. And year after year, millions of Jews don't keep the promises they made to themselves and to God.

Why is that? Why are we only the best versions of ourselves when we're under the metaphorical gun, sitting in shul and literally praying for our lives? Why can't we be the people outside these walls that we say we want to be while sitting here?

This isn't about breaking a New Year's Resolution to go to the gym. It's not even forgetting to be nicer to your brother. No, what I'm talking about is neglecting the deep, soul-searching vows we make on Rosh Hashanah - the oaths we take to be better people, morally, spiritually, and ethically.

To be sure, some of those promises are made as we absentmindedly add our voices to everyone else's and say words we don't understand. But I absolutely believe that in *most* of these cases, we intend to keep our promises. But when we leave this space, our good intentions run headlong into the realities of the real world - and one by one, our commitments to be better fall to the wayside.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote that "the distance between who we are and who we ought to be is, for most of us, vast." I would add that this is not only about who we ought to be, but also about who we *want* to be. To what do we aspire, how do we want others to see us, how do we want to see ourselves. Sometimes, we actively strive to be that person; other times, we let life get in the way.

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Take a moment and think of an adjective or two that describe who you want to be. In your most aspirational dreams, what kind of person are you?

[PAUSE]

Now think of another: who are you in reality?

WAIT FOR ANSWERS TO BE SHARED

*[my answers: creative, generous, empathetic, patient, passionate, a superhero ]*

Now I want you to think about something you've been wanting to do or accomplish for a long time that hasn't happened yet. Are you willing to share it with us?

WAIT FOR ANSWERS TO BE SHARED

[examples: take a class, travel, grow a farm, learn a new skill, come to daily minyan, sponsor an immigrant family, open a B&B]

Lastly, what's one thing you could do this year that would make you a better person?

WAIT FOR ANSWERS TO BE SHARED

[examples: donate food to the food bank, volunteer in the community,  
meet my neighbors, ]

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Take a moment and think back to the adjectives you used to describe who you *want* to be. As you roll them around in your head, ask yourself this question: "Am I *really* NOT that trait?" If you said "generous," for example, ask yourself if you're truly selfish - or if you're just not as giving as you'd like to be, sitting in shul on the High Holidays and thinking about matters of life and death.

With due respect to Rabbi Sacks, for most people, the difference isn't as vast as you might think. Someone who wishes to be patient is in all likelihood already patient - but as I said earlier, life gets in the way. Or rather, we *let* life get in the way - in the way of perfection, in the way of happiness, in the way of us being the people we want to be, *to the extent* that we want to be them.

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One of my favorite aphorisms is that “a goal without a plan is just a wish.” A goal set in January, without an action plan or follow-up is just one more resolution likely to go un-kept. How you think right here and right now that you’re going to spend the next 365 days is not likely how you *will* spend the next year... unless, of course, you take concrete actions to craft goals and come back to them throughout the year.

That’s how I’d like us to spend some of our time together this morning.

In a moment, I will hand out a sample card. We’re not going to actually write the goals right now because it’s a chag, but we’re going to model the process of thinking them through.

The card asks a few crucial questions on one side: What do you want to accomplish? Why do you want to accomplish it? And how are you going to achieve it? And the back gives us a reminder of some of the myriad different ways to connect with Judaism.

**Rosh Hashanah is a time to think about our Jewish aspirations. Who do we want to be as Jews this year? In what new ways do we want to engage with our community? Are there risks we are drawn to taking this year? I encourage you to think about how you can set one goal**

**that serves a dual purpose: to bring you closer to who you want to be as a person, and to bring you closer to your best Jewish self.**

One of my professional goals this year is to help cultivate 3 new people to lead services on Shabbat morning. One personal goal is to take more calculated risks in pursuit of making the world a better place. Both are rooted in Judaism, but they are vastly different. I would encourage you to use the list on the back of the card to think broadly about what kind of Jewish goal you'd like to set for this coming year.

Think for a moment or two, then turn to someone nearby and share with them three things: what you hope to accomplish; why it is meaningful to you; and how you're going to do it.

[As a side note: since you're not writing this down, it's not out of the question that when someone asks you about this sermon at lunch you'll say, "Totally inspiring - I made such great goals for myself for the year... and I don't remember any of them." So if you can, talk to someone you might see again, someone who can help you remember your answers... at least until you can write them down]

EXPLAIN THINK-PAIR-SHARE

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## Conclusion

The late, great writer and thinker Peter Drucker once wrote, "You can either take action, or you can hang back and hope for a miracle. Miracles are great. But they are so unpredictable." Taking concrete, actionable steps is what will help differentiate this year from last year.

In both of the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah there is an eye-opening moment for the protagonist. This morning, God opened Hagar's eyes to see the life-saving well of water that was right in front of her. Tomorrow morning, an angel will call out to Abraham and he will see the ram that is already stuck in the bush - and thus sacrifice the animal instead of his son.

The shofar, not coincidentally, is made from a ram's horn. When you hear its clarion call this holiday season, let your mind travel back to the moment that Abraham saw the animal in the thicket and his eyes were opened.

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld writes:

Think about the thicket of your life. What possibilities have you not seen?

Think about a story you are telling yourself whose outcome you think you already know. What alternatives have you not noticed?

And think about the path we are all on together. The altars at the end of the road. The children we love but seem prepared to sacrifice.

Look up.

Listen.

Incline your heart, your ear

To the hollow, bent ram's horn

Through which human breath becomes a summons and a blast.

What might we hear?

How might we respond?

As we allow our hearts to be moved this holiday season, I encourage you to turn those emotions into concrete actions. If this sample of an activity spoke to you, take more cards on your way out. The Yamim Nora'im are our opportunity to reflect on who we are and who we want to be. This year, let's give ourselves a real opportunity to become the person we see for ourselves.

Shana Tova.