

RH2 5772: The year of _____
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Having lived in Lexington for over two months now, I cannot help but feel a sense of pride and awe as I drive around parts of New England. I am able to walk, literally, in the footsteps of the great heroes of our country. I can visit the homes of the brave men and women who helped create these United States.

I have walked the dusty gravel path in Minuteman State Park
I've visited the old homes and institutions in Lexington and Concord
And I've gone swimming in Walden Pond.

I even had the chance to visit the most mythical place in all of New England,
Fenway.

However, to a person without an awareness of history, Lexington and Concord are just small towns twenty minutes outside of Boston. Walden Pond is indistinguishable from its neighboring bodies of water. Fenway is just an old rusting baseball stadium.

But we know that this is simply not the case.

History was made at everyone of those locations. Lexington and Concord served as the stage for the original "shot heard round the world." It was only a few miles down the road that our founding fathers fought for their independence – for the right to have the government represent them.

The results of their determination reverberate to us this very day. Over 200 years later, we are the beneficiaries of their legacy.

And in truth, all of our present day situations can in some way be traced to the decisions and actions undertaken by our ancestors.

Were it not for my parents emigrating to the United States from Argentina over 35 years ago – I would not be here on this bimah today.

Were it not for their parents braving the voyage across the Atlantic from Poland – I would not be here today.

The list goes on forever – and I am sure that each one of you can trace how a relatives actions dozens of years ago – continue to affect you this day.

That what one person does matters – not only to them – but to those around them and to those not even born yet –is something that I like to call legacy.

I would like to think that we all strive to create a positive lasting legacy. We would all like to be thought of as a good person, a loving person or an honest person.

But just how significant can one person's legacy be?
What is the width and breadth of a person's influence?
Just how much influence can one person have?

Eliezer Ben Yehuda was born in 1858 in what is present day Belarus. In many ways, Ben Yehudah was like a typical child – he went to religious school, learned how to read and write, spent some time in Yeshiva. Inspired to continue his education, Ben Yehuda soon traveled to Paris to study at the Sorbonne University. There, he learned a variety of different subjects and eventually focused on the Hebrew Language.

Swept up in the Zionist movement of his day, he soon realized the critical importance of having a national language to compliment a national homeland.

He states: "The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and return it to the fatherland."

You have to understand that in Ben Yehuda's day, no one in the world conversed in Hebrew. Jews all over the world spoke English, Yiddish Ladino or whatever happened to be the local language. Using Hebrew for anything other than prayer, study or in writing, was considered sacrilegious. How could the same language that was used to create the world – the same language that we use to praise God – be used for asking directions or giving a recipe.

Realizing the importance of language, Ben Yehuda made Aliyah to Israel in 1881. Knowing the need to raise native Hebrew speakers, Ben Yehuda required anyone speaking to his children to only speak in Hebrew. Which, while a great idea in theory, was challenging, as his wife didn't speak Hebrew... yet.

A story is told that once Ben Yehuda left his wife and kids to go on a trip. When he realized he forgot his hat, he returned home and became very upset when he caught his wife singing a Russian lullaby to his children.

Far from being applauded for his efforts, the local rabbis in Jerusalem excommunicated him for his linguistic efforts and even got him in trouble with the Turkish government.

Undeterred, Ben Yehuda continued teaching Conversational Hebrew to Jews living in the land of Israel. Aside from the absence of native speakers, the language also lacked another important feature: modern words. Remember – no one had spoken conversational Hebrew in nearly 2000 years!

After all, the source for most Hebrew nouns and verbs was the Torah and other classic Jewish writings. Because Moses never took a train or ordered ice cream for dessert, modern Hebrew simply lacked the words.

As a remedy, Ben Yehuda took ancient words and worked hard to find them new meanings.

Take something like ice cream – how does one describe ice cream. Today, everyone who wants ice cream in Israel simply asks for Glida. But where did the word come from? An ancient word to describe something cold or frosty is Kerach – and indeed it means ice in Modern Hebrew. Combing over ancient texts, Ben Yehudah found an Aramaic translation of the Torah that translates Ice/Kerach as Glida. Voila – a 2,000 year old synonym instantly became a new modern Hebrew word.

The Train – in Ezekiel's vision of God in the Prophets, Ezekiel describes God as riding a Mercavah – a wheeled chariot! Speakers of Hebrew simply took the same root – resh chaf bet and turned it into rakevet. Again – an ancient word given new life in the modern state.

By publishing local Hebrew newspapers and distributing new dictionaries and lists of new words – Ben Yehuda succeeded in inspiring a new generation to speak a new language.

When Ben Yehuda died in 1922, over 30,000 people attended his funeral. Today, a pedestrian mall in the heart of Jerusalem is named after him. Some of you may have even had a falafel or shwarma on Ben Yehuda street.

One man, single handedly changed the Jewish world as we know it. While he had contemporaries who were already working on resurrecting Hebrew, his vision and leadership made it a reality. One professor put it best – had Ben Yehudah not succeeded – more than likely the Israel's Declaration of Independence would not have been written in Hebrew – but in German – a language that spoken by most people.

Can you imagine if he had failed?

Born to Joseph and Rose Kennedy and one of 9 children, Eunice Mary Kennedy was born not too far away from here in Brookline, Massachusetts, on 10 July 1921. In addition to her brothers, who you might have heard of, John and Ted and Robert, Eunice also had a sister named Rosemary, who although typical in many ways – was also different.

Rosemary wasn't as book-smart as her siblings. She didn't have the same social graces or personality either. Over time, the disparity between Rosemary and her siblings grew and grew. She had violent mood swings and was just different.

Trying to find a solution to his daughter's issues, their father took drastic measures. He authorized a doctor to operate on his daughter and perform a frontal lobotomy. The procedure did not work out as planned and left her with even more diminished abilities and brain damage. As a result, Rosemary had to be institutionalized.

During the 1950s and 1960s – people who were different were simply removed from the larger community and institutionalized. People were not seen as individuals with specific needs – but rather simply as not-fitting in with the rest of the public.

Eunice Shriver started visiting her sister at her facility and realized that something had to change. After visiting several institutions for people with intellectual disabilities across United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she was appalled by their treatment.

She believed that, given the same opportunities and experiences as typical children, those with special needs would be more successful than commonly believed.

Shriver put that vision into action in 1962. She invited dozens of children with intellectual disabilities to Camp Shriver, a summer day camp that she hosted in her backyard.

These participants were able to explore their capabilities in a variety of sports and physical activities. The success of the Camp Shriver concept – that through sports people with intellectual disabilities can realize their potential for growth – began to spread.

In July 1968, the first International Special Olympics Games were held in Chicago, Illinois.

In her opening ceremony address, Shriver stated “The Chicago Special Olympics prove a very fundamental fact - that exceptional children — children with mental retardation — can be exceptional athletes. That children can explore their potential for growth through sports.”

Shriver also announced a new national program — Special Olympics — to offer people with intellectual disabilities everywhere “the chance to play, the chance to compete and the chance to grow.”

What began as one woman's vision evolved into Special Olympics - a global movement that today serves 3 million people with intellectual disabilities in nearly 200 nations around the world.

Over 40 years ago, Kennedy had the courage to embrace the different members of our community, who up until that point were largely institutionalized and isolated.

The Special Olympics not only provide an opportunity to compete. But an opportunity to foster new friendships, find support groups, create new communities and inspire the entire world.

Two very different people.

One who lived in America and One who lived in Israel

One Jewish and one Roman Catholic

One American and One Russian

We never met them, but their influence affects us here today.

They changed the way that we see each other.

And the way that we speak to each other

Today – millions of Israeli's and Jews around the world speak to each other in Hebrew. National Television shows from America are either translated into Hebrew or have Hebrew Subtitles. Hebrew is the only ancient language in the history of the world to be resurrected.

Today – summer camps and schools all over the world have special needs programs. Our own Ramah camping movement boasts, special needs programs at 8 of their camps and even a family camp. As one staff member once told me, the special-needs camps aren't just for the participants – they make the entire camp a better place.

These two people seem larger than life.

And you may be thinking,
I don't think I have the ability to revive a dead language.
I may not be able to create an international organization.

But rather than focus on what seems unachievable, I'd like to focus on the reality of what is possible.

The concept –
that we can reinvent ourselves
that we can create something new for future generations
that we can make decision this very year that will change the world for the better

is the very essence of Rosh Hashanah.

We are not defined by the mistakes of yesteryear but by our commitment to make the new year better.

We sound the shofar to serve as a wake up call that we must strive to be the person that we want to be.

I am telling you that it is possible, in the New Year, to create your own personal legacy through specific actions.

Are you habitually tardy? Then 5772 is the year of punctuality.
Do you wish you ate better? Then 5772 is the year of a healthy eating.
Is there a relative with whom you've lost touch for several years – 5772 is the year of reconnecting.

Perhaps this year will be the year that you as a family decide to make Friday Night Dinner into Shabbat. No matter what.

No matter the meetings, the parties, the other commitments – Friday Night dinner is sacred. And just to be clear – it doesn't have to be a 3 course meal – maybe its a just a pizza pie – but that pizza, surrounded by family and friends – is transformative.

For me – 5772 will be the year of balance. I am making a promise to myself to ensure that I live a lifestyle that gives adequate attention to work and home.

It involves weekly uninterrupted phone calls to family who lives further away then every before.

It involves being home for dinner, even if it is just a short dinner, nearly every night of the week.

On Sunday following Shabbat Shuva, a sign will be set up somewhere in the shul. Next to it will be anonymous note cards that simply say: 5772: The Year of _____. I invite you to make goals as families and as individuals and attach them to the board. It is my hope that by writing them down and seeing them periodically in the shul – they will serve as a reminder of the pledge that you made to yourself today.

A midrash in kohelet rabbah teaches that a person has three names in this world:

The first name is what your parents call you. In many ways, this name is entirely given by someone else you are not in control.

The second name you get in this world is the name that others call you. Perhaps this is a nickname or a more formal name. In this case both you and the other – can define who you are.

The third name you have in this world – is the name that you make for yourself. You alone decide what kind of a person you are and the legacy that you leave behind.

I'd like to leave you with a blessing today.

May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Sarah Rebecca Leah and Rachel, empower us throughout the year to ensure that our actions enable us to create the life and legacy that we desire.

Give us strength to make 5772 – the year when we take steps to earn the name we desire.

Shanah Tovah