

Shanah tovah.

I want to begin by letting you all know what a gift this year has been for me. A year ago, I stood before you as your new rabbi and shared with you some of my thoughts: how new beginnings are challenging (that one was right on the mark!), my love of Israel, my approach to mitzvot and the unusual birth of my son Ari, reminding me of the fragility of life. Sharing pieces of myself, I hoped to not only inspire you, but also to become a part of your lives.

While I may or may not have been successful, something was missing. I did not know you. Coming in as “the new rabbi” is like walking into a class as the substitute teacher – everyone knows everyone, except you – the one who is supposed to know everything and teach others. Like the substitute teacher, I found out quickly that I had the most to learn.

Keeping true to my name, I have tried to learn. I learned about you, your lives, your ups and downs. I learned about this community – its history and the unique qualities that first attracted me to join you. I learned about Boston – its Jewish community, interfaith relations and some of its politics. I learned about Massachusetts and its beauty – from Walden Pond to the Cape, the Berkshires to Cape Ann. I learned about being your rabbi and I learned about myself.

While I still have much more to learn and many more of you to learn about, I stand before you today with new learning and understanding that allows me greater perspective and awareness.

May those positive insights bring us all a *shanah tovah*, a year of blessing.

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We gather today on Rosh Hashanah, described by the rabbis as “*hayom harat olam.*” Today is the birthday of the world. As I mentioned in a recent bulletin article, there is something repetitive about these high holy days, returning each year to this experience. Yet, we do it each year – so I stand before you again to share with you because *hayom harat olam* – today is pregnant with eternity, filled with possibility. Today we turn over a new page, to utilize the dominant liturgical metaphor of the Book of Life.

Rosh Hashanah has many different qualities. There is a sense of awe as we remind ourselves that we are entering a time when we are judged by the Sovereign of the Universe, the Ultimate Judge, the source of justice ... and by ourselves.

But it is also a time for celebration. Today is the birthday of the universe when we remember that all living things are intimately united in the web of life. We share the same origins and the same ultimate fate. We are all connected to the Creator.

Between these polarities: a day of judgment, on the one hand, and a birthday party, on the other, lies today’s central theme: renewal. A new year, a new chapter, a new start.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of transformation. We usher in now our most intense days, the *aseret y’mei teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance, culminating in *Yom HaKippurim*. These are days of self-examination when we look into ourselves, explore who we are, what we’re made of, what we’re really about, and how we can become better people – how we think about others, how we think about ourselves, how we speak about others, how we speak about ourselves, and how we speak to others – and to ourselves.

There are two sides to this dynamic – God and people. Traditionally, we categorize our 613 biblical commandments into two groups: *mitzvot bein adam lamakom*, commandments that impact on our relationship with God and *mitzvot bein adam l'haveiro*, mitzvot that affect our relations with others. While much of this season deals with reconciling ourselves to God, returning to God, if you will, our rabbis gently shifted the emphasis.

The Mishnah states that while these high holy days with their prayers, rituals and repentance can help us reconcile with God, they are not enough. For that, we need *mehilah* – asking each other for forgiveness, part of the process of *teshuvah*. Today, I want to focus on that side of the equation: how we treat each other and, ultimately, ourselves.

In the great Jewish text: *Pirkei Avot*, the section of the Mishnah that deals with behavior and ethics, Yehoshua ben Peraḥiyah teaches the following: “*havey dan et kol ha'adam l'khaf z'khut* – when you assess people, tip the balance in their favor.”

We all have flaws. In fact, all people have flaws, but Yehoshua ben Peraḥiyah teaches us to look at each whole person in the larger context so that we can always give others the benefit of extra merit.

L'khaf is the word *kaf*, hand, so the phrase means: tip your hand toward someone. Imagine two hands, like a balance scale – Yehoshua ben Peraḥiyah asks us to tip the scale in their favor, giving them the benefit of the doubt. *L'khaf* also implies to open your hand, not close it in an aggressive stance. Show your hand – be open to others and reveal your own vulnerabilities.

Of course, putting out an open hand implies also extending a hand to others and helping them, lifting them up. This is one of the most magnificent rabbinic teachings about how we should view others and relates to the concept of *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah, returning our relationships to an ideal state, is a complicated business. Our tradition asks us to spend the month before Rosh Hashanah and then ten more days devoted to this process. But, it is difficult and challenging. It can be an overwhelming process; it might even seem too daunting to attempt, ... unless we have a positive outlook.

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Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, the great Hasidic master who lived two hundred years ago in Podolia and Ukraine, was a great optimist; he encouraged others to always have a positive attitude. He is known as the *Saneigor* of Israel, the Defender of the Jewish people before a sometimes critical God.

Once as Reb Nahman was traveling in his carriage, having an animated conversation with God, he exclaimed: “*B'nei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, the Jewish people love You God and they are great people, studying Torah and always performing mitzvot.” Just then, Reb Nahman came across a Jew whose wagon was stuck in the mud.

“Aha,” God challenged him, “See, this is what I was talking about – the Jewish people do not really care about the mitzvot; look at this man, pushing his wagon out of the mud with his *tallis* and *tefillin* on. He interrupted his prayers, his *kavannah* for this!”

Reb Nahman saw the scene differently, “*Ribbono Shel Olam* – Master of the Universe, this man is stuck in deep mud, but he keeps his *tallis* and *tefillin* on, he keeps talking to You, even while he is trying to free his wagon.”

Looking at this situation, Reb Nahman preferred to see the glass as half full – to see the positive in every moment and in every person.

This worldview inspired one of Rabbi Nahman's greatest homilies about *teshuvah* – repentance and transformation. Let me share a version of it with you which was translated and taught to me by Rabbi Art Green.

“You have to judge every person generously. Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked, it's your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness, some place in that person where he is not evil. When you find that bit of goodness and judge the person *that* way, you really may raise her up to goodness. Treating people this way allows them to be restored, to come to *teshuvah*.

“This is why the Psalmist said: ‘Just a little bit more and there will be no wicked one: you will look at his place and he will not be there.’ (Psalm 36). He tells us to judge one and all so generously, so much on the good side, even if we think they are as sinful as can be.

“By looking for that “little bit,” the place however small within them where there is no sin (and everyone, after all, has such a place) and by telling them, showing them, that *that's* who they are, we can help them change their lives.

“Even the person you think (and he agrees!) is completely rotten – how is it possible that at some time in his life he has not done some good deed or some mitzvah? Your job is just to help him look for it, to seek it out, and then to judge him that way. Then indeed you will “look at his place” and find that the wicked one is no longer there – not because she has died or disappeared, God forbid – but because, with your help, she will no longer be where you first saw her or the way you first saw her. By seeking out that bit of goodness you allowed *teshuvah* to take its course.

“So now, my clever friend, now that you know how to treat the wicked and find some bit of good in them – now go do it for yourself as well. You know what I have taught you: ‘Take great care: be happy always!’ ‘Stay far, far away from sadness and depression.’ I've said it to you more than once. I know what happens when you start examining yourself. ‘No goodness at all’ you find. ‘Just full of sin.’ Watch out for Old Man Gloom, my friend, the one who wants to push you down. This is one of his best tricks. That's why I said: ‘Now go do it for yourself as well.’ You too must have done some good for someone sometime. Now go look for it! But you find it and discover that it is too full of holes. You know yourself too well to be fooled: ‘Even the good things I did,’ you say, ‘were all for the wrong reasons. Impure motives! Lousy deeds!’ ‘Then keep digging,’ I tell you, ‘keep digging, because somewhere inside that now-tarnished mitzvah, somewhere in it there was indeed a little bit of good.’ That's all you need to find; just the smallest bit; a dot of goodness. That should be enough to give you life, to bring you back to joy. By seeking out that little bit even in yourself and judging yourself that way, showing yourself that *that* is who you are, you can change your whole life and bring yourself to *teshuvah*.

“It's that first little dot of goodness that's the hardest one to find (or the hardest one to *admit* you found!). The next ones will come a little easier, each one following another.

“And you know what? These little dots of goodness in yourself – after a while you will find that you can sing them and they become your *niggun*, [your tune] the *niggun* you fashion by not letting yourself be pushed down, and by rescuing your own

good spirit from all that darkness and depression. The *niggun* brings you back to life and then you can start to pray. ...”¹

I understand this homily to work in the world on five levels.

First and foremost, it begins with ourselves. Rabbi Nahman is teaching us that we should examine ourselves and appreciate the goodness within us. We all have faults and flaws, but if we focus too much on them; it makes us critical and negative. This is one of the hardest tasks we have as human beings: to be kind to ourselves. Those of us who can be critical are most critical of ourselves.

Reminding us to be happy, Rabbi Nahman wants us to move away from negativity that we impose upon ourselves. Find a little dot of goodness in ourselves, sing to it, encourage it, have it bring us back to life.

The second level is our families, those with whom we are most intimate – our partners, our children, parents, and siblings – those with whom we share the most special and close bonds, with whom we interact constantly, with whom we share our most precious joys and to whom we reveal our darkest weaknesses, those who are privileged to enjoy both great kindness and special treatment, but also suffer the harshest critique.

I hope by now, most of us are aware of how much harm occurs in our own homes, among our closest family and loved ones. It seems that those who live closest to us sometimes receive the worst treatment. People let down their guard and become unbelievably insensitive at home. We must take great care to treat those who live with us in our homes with great respect.

As the Talmud says, in *Masekhet Yevamot* (62b): “Our rabbis taught: The one who loves one’s partner as one’s self and honors one’s partner more than one’s self ... of them the Torah states, ‘their home will be a home of peace.’”

The third level is our community. We all participate in Temple Emunah’s vibrant activities, religious services, educational programs, and our social action initiatives (and if your don’t, you should consider it!). This builds our active community to nourish and nurture ourselves and to share life’s joys and *smahot* with this precious family.

Sometimes we look at the synagogue community as being so strong and powerful that it does not need us; but the truth is: shuls are very fragile, they are like flowers, and a wind can come and blow them apart.

Sometimes we become preoccupied with the unavoidable differences of opinion, challenges, or even errors that inevitably occur in a wide-ranging, diverse, and active community like ours. But communities are a delicate web of connectedness; they are not strong when the threads are weak.

We need to approach each other with *l’khafz’khut*, to tip the balance in favor of the other person, to approach someone when there is a question – to understand why something occurred when there is a problem – to do so with great respect, choosing moments of critique carefully so that no one will be embarrassed. The Talmud states that *halvanat panim*, literally, whitening the face, causing someone embarrassment in public is akin to murder.

¹ Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, *Liqqutey MoHaRaN* 282 (trans. Prof. Arthur Green)

We should try to focus, as Rabbi Nahman taught us, on the positive, because our community is only as strong as each one of us. Our shul community needs every one of us to be positive and to work together.

The fourth level is the Jewish people. The Jewish people have endured another difficult year. This was the year when Israel disengaged from the Gaza Strip, a process that was taxing on all of entire Israeli society as it struggled with this most divisive issue. It was incredibly difficult for the 9,000 Jews who were uprooted from their homes.

Whatever our political opinions and orientations are (and I know we run the gamut!), there is no doubt that this was one of the most painful episodes in Israeli history. I was most impressed with the fact that Israel remained united, that those who were in the army were able to work together with those who were being evacuated, that they mourned and cried together, they prayed even as they went through this most difficult ordeal. With only a few exceptions, the army behaved beautifully as did most of the evacuees mourning their traumatic losses.

I think it speaks to the positive attitude that Israelis have. In Israel's short 57-year history, it has endured numerous challenges, internal struggles, absorbing large numbers of immigrants, economic hurdles, external enemies, and constant terrorism. But there is a great internal resolve in the State of Israel that things will turn out OK, that by working together Israel will be able to overcome, as was certainly the case this year. While the situation with Gaza is still chaotic, I pray that the optimistic attitude endures, whatever challenges are yet to come.

The State of Israel is such a bastion of positive energy and Jewish inspiration that it is my hope that all of us will deepen our connection to Israel. This coming February, three families from our congregation will be going on a mission to Israel, and in February of 2007, it is my hope to lead a major Temple Emunah trip to Israel that will occur over February vacation. While it may seem a way off, if you are interested in joining me and being involved in the leadership and planning of this incredible experience, please seek me out after the holidays.

A few weeks ago an op-ed appeared in Israel's leading liberal newspaper, *Ha-aretz* written by Sami Micha'el, a contemporary Israeli author (The Power of a Dream).

He writes: "Sixty-six years ago this month, World War II, perhaps the biggest war in human history, broke out. An entire continent lost its sanity and the other continents were carried away with it. A war of brutal terror against innocents took place in Europe in the air, on land and by sea. A death sentence was imposed on entire races. Flourishing cities were wiped out.

"Schemes were hatched to turn nations into a new type of slaves. The countries that had shaped modern human civilization Germany, England, Italy, France and Russia - donned a murderous mask. Had someone stood up in those days of horror and talked about peace, unity, a common currency and open borders he would have been shot as a deserter. But 40 years after the end of the nightmare, the miracle came true.

"For our own well-being and continued survival, we ought to adopt the European model that grew out of the blood and ashes of the wars. It won't happen tomorrow or the day after. The Middle Eastern Union will come into being maybe in another 40 years, maybe more. [...] Each country will maintain its political and cultural independence as in the European Union but we will live with open borders, [...], with modern technology

available to all and with the secure feeling that the neighbor is a doctor and not a murderer, a civilized person and not a disseminator of racism and hatred.

“Even a fragile dream may contain a formula for hope and calm in a time of anxiety and loss of way.”

While Micha’el’s dream of peace may seem difficult to achieve, it is an end towards which Israel and her neighbors should aspire. By looking for the good, infusing it with hope and optimism, we know we can reach those dreams.

And, in a sense, Micha’el’s vision for Israel provides a helpful bridge to the fifth level of insight we glean from Rabbi Nahman’s teaching. Beyond the Jewish people, we find that fifth level – all of humanity, which needs our support more and more. Today on Rosh Hashanah as we remember that the entire universe began at this moment, we affirm our commitment to caring for all.

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As we see from this day of Rosh Hashanah, from the Mishnah’s statement about how we judge others, to Rabbi Nahman’s teaching about judging ourselves and others, of self-transformation through *teshuvah*, we have the power to change ourselves and our relationships with others.

We can push ourselves to the tipping point, altering the way we approach others, shifting the energy, moving beyond negativity, and clearing the way for positive thinking and positive action. Once we do that, then, as Yehoshua ben Peraḥiyah also teaches: we will have restored many relationships. Our families, our synagogue, Israel, and the world will be better for it.

May this year be a year of looking for the good in us and in the world. Amen.

Shanah tovah u’metukah – a good and sweet year to us all.