

One Day At A Time
Parashat Haazinu 5787
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Shabbat Shalom! Just one week ago, we celebrated the beginning of a new year, 5787. Rosh Hashanah begins our Days of Awe, Days of Repentance, ten days in which we are called to reflect upon our lives, make amends for our mistakes over the past year, resolve to make changes, and start the new year off right. Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat that falls in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is another reminder of the important work we are to do during these ten days. Its name comes from the Prophet Hosea, who cries out: שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל, “Return, O Israel...”¹, calling us to repentance, repair, and return. And in just 48 hours, we will usher in Yom Kippur, concluding these ten days with a full day of reflection, confession, and prayer. But right now, we are in the thick of it all, the hard work that can open ourselves up to a new way of living in the world. Which really begs the question: how will each of us live our lives differently come Tuesday morning?

¹ Hosea 14:2

There is a perhaps cliché saying, maybe cliché just among rabbis and cantors, that how you act between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur isn't as important as how you act between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. That every day, not just during the High Holy Days, but every day, we have the opportunity to be the best version of ourselves. But that's not only difficult, it feels just about impossible. The best version of ourselves, every day? We know that we will make mistakes, and hurt people, and confront challenges, because we are human. In fact, Kol Nidre, which literally means "All Vows", the beautiful prayer that begins Yom Kippur, takes this reality into account. We are not only renouncing vows that we failed to complete in the past year, we are annulling any future ones, from this Yom Kippur to the next, knowing that we will inevitably fall short in our commitments. Not because we are bad or evil, but just because we are human. This recognition is important, yet it perhaps leaves us wondering how we are to approach this year, knowing we will make mistakes, but also wanting to hold out hope that this year really will be a sweeter, brighter, better new year.

In his book *Meditations for Mortals*, the British journalist and author Oliver Burkeman explores strategies for how to live well in our modern world - and how to meet this moment. This book is the anti-productivity book; instead of writing about how to live longer or complete more tasks, Burkeman attempts to help us live with meaning, wonder, joy, and goodness. Among many excellent ideas, there's one strategy that Burkeman shares that could help us move into this new year with intention and purpose: stop trying to be a better person. Let me explain. Many of us build up this time of year. There is much to be reflected upon, apologized for, resolved toward, and our tradition calls us to that work. It is also true that come Tuesday morning, the day after Yom Kippur, each of us will have many choices to make, things to accomplish, life to have happen. And that if our focus is the amorphous idea of "being a better person", we may find that we're all of a sudden putting undue pressure on ourselves; or, experiencing disappointment when we inevitably make a mistake; or, miss small opportunities to make our lives and the world better because we're thinking too big, too broad.

On this strategy, Burkeman writes:

“Our limitations make fresh starts impossible: you are already here, in time, shaped by everything that came before this moment, and with whatever personality, resources and challenges you find yourself to have...more fully accepting that you are who you are, and where you are, might change a lot, by permitting you to abandon the dream of a fresh start and actually do one thing today that truly matters, and that makes life resonate once more.”²

Burkeman’s wisdom certainly resonates with me. Not just on Rosh Hashanah, but at moments throughout the year, I find myself wanting to “start over”, resetting my to-be-read list, reorganizing my Google docs, moving things around the house, and resolving to live differently once those things are done, as if I won’t come across other books to read, or misplace a document, or move things ever again. It’s very hopeful of me, I think. And perhaps of you, if this sounds familiar. But it also builds up unrealistic expectations that don’t truly lead me toward the way I hope to live in the world.

² Oliver Burkeman, *Meditations for Mortals*, Pg. 161.

Burkeman's advice to "do one thing today that truly matters" is also at the core of our High Holy Day prayers. On both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we recite Unetaneh Tokef, a liturgically challenging prayer that raises the stakes of these days. It portrays God as the all-powerful Judge of the universe, calling us toward repentance, repair, and return. And if we were to fail in those endeavors, we would die, the Book of Life sealed without our name written inside it this year. Now, it's important to say that this is not how our world works; and we know that to be true. For as big and wondrous as God may be, we are human, and we make mistakes, but no one, not us, not our loved ones, not people around the world, no one is being punished by God for those mistakes. For as painful and harsh as these words are, they are part of our High Holy Day liturgy because they still offer us a way forward. They still beg us, plead us, call us to live well. To live like we know that one day, some day, each of us will come to the end of the road. And that when that day comes, we will wish that we had laughed more; loved harder; and lived better.

This prayer ends with the pathways to do that, to live a life of meaning no matter how short or long it may be. First, teshuvah, repentance that repairs our relationships with ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, and world. Second, tefilah, prayer that steadies our mind, fills our heart, and allows us to focus on the most important things in life. And third, tzedakah, giving of ourselves to support others and make the world a better place. Instead of “trying to be a better person”, what would our lives look like if we committed to do one of these, or all of these, each and every day? What if we found ways “to do one thing today, and every day, that truly matters?” We may not be able to immediately change our complicated relationship with our sibling, cousin, or friend; but we could send them one message, perhaps opening things up for change. We set goals to go to the gym, meditate, pray, journal, all things that we know are good for us; and instead of getting frustrated when we miss a day, we can appreciate ourselves when we do make time for those things. And we don’t have to singlehandedly save our democracy this November; but we could combat voter suppression by writing postcards, or phonebanking, or working on Election Day. Setting out to do one thing, every day, that truly matters, could change everything for us.

As we consider how we want to show up in our lives, I'll conclude tonight with one of my favorite Talmudic stories, as compiled by the Ein Yaakov in the 16th century. The rabbis of the Talmud are debating a big question: what is the most important verse in the Torah? Ben Zoma argues first that it is "Shema Yisrael", "Hear Oh Israel Adonai is Our God, Adonai is One." This is a pretty good first answer; our short, but powerful declaration of perfect faith in God. But Ben Nanas disagrees. He argues that the most important verse in our Torah is "Love your neighbor as yourself" found in Leviticus. This is also a great answer; the command to love one another. Elsewhere in Talmud, Rabbi Akiva declares this the central verse of Torah too. But Ben Azai has one more suggestion. He argues that it should be that "God created Adam in the likeness of God." This too, a very good answer; the reminder that each of us are created b'tzelem Elohim, "in the image of God."

Debate ensues about each of these answers, until Shimon ben Pazi brings forward one final idea, an idea that Yehudah HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah deems to be the correct:

אֶת־הַכֶּבֶשׂ אֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֹּקֶר וְאֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים:

"You shall offer one lamb in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight."

This verse, from the Book of Numbers, may seem obscure, irrelevant, incredibly ancient. And initially, the other rabbis agreed. How could this verse about sacrifices be more important than verses about the oneness of God, loving our neighbor, and being created in the image of God? Shimon ben Pazi then explains: “My mundane verse is really a verse saying that every day do a little bit that is required of you. ‘Do the morning task in the morning and the evening task in the evening.’ The tallest mountain is climbed one step at a time, a hungry community is fed one mouth at a time, a good life is lived one day at a time.”³ Hearing this profound explanation from Shimon ben Pazi, the debate was clearly over; the rabbis had found the most important verse in our Torah. And in identifying that verse, they gave us a precious reminder about our lives: that our lives are made up by years, which are made up by months, which are made up by weeks, which are made up by days. And each day, we have the chance to fill it with meaning, all by starting small. “A good life is lived one day at a time.” Shabbat Shalom!

³ Rabbi Danny Zemel. A Time To Speak, Pg. 121.