

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5773

“Birth is a beginning and death a destination. But life is a journey, a going, a growing from stage to stage. From childhood to maturity and youth to age. From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing. From foolishness to discretion and then perhaps to wisdom.

From weakness to strength or strength to weakness – and often back again. From health to sickness and back, we pray, to health again. From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love, from joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion and grief to understanding – from fear to faith.

Birth is a beginning and death a destination, but life is a journey: a sacred pilgrimage made stage by stage, from birth to death, to life everlasting.”

All of us here are on a journey through life. While an unplanned trip can sometimes succeed, the most successful trips are those which are planned out. And so, we usually set goals for our trips, places or people we want to see, events we want to experience.

Life’s journey is no different. Each of us here tonight has different individual goals. Some may want to get married, others to find a new job. Some look forward to graduation or taking a trip. Others look forward to seeing their favorite sports team win a championship.

As we begin our trip through the new year of 5773 tonight, we gather to voice our Jewish goals for the year so that this journey may be all that it can be. Though the specific details may vary from person to person, we gather as a community tonight, along with other Jewish communities throughout the world, to affirm that we can be better, we can do better and we can make things better.

Sometimes, we learn and are reminded of life's lessons and goals from our own individual encounters with the world. Yet so often, I find that it is my interactions with others which teach me how best to better my life.

Being a rabbi enables me to witness parts of other people's Jewish journeys which are hidden from most people. A few times every year, I get to do this with a small group of Reform rabbis, as we gather at a mikvah in Teaneck and welcome adults and children into the Jewish people.

Before an adult converts to Judaism, they go through a period of study averaging close to a year. Some of those immersing in the mikvah have studied with me and I am very familiar with their Jewish journeys. The rest come from the congregations of the other rabbis gathering at the mikvah.

Every year, thousands of Americans become Jewish. In fact, about one of every thirty American Jews was not born Jewish. While most conversions involve a romantic relationship with a Jew, so many of these special individuals don't just convert; they truly embrace Judaism.

While those of us who are born Jews often take our heritage for granted, Jews by Choice are thrilled to find a religious tradition which offers a warm and welcoming environment, the ability to question and the freedom to individualize their observance, rather than having it dictated to them. It is for these reasons and more that they often understand, better than many Jews by Birth, what a special blessing it is to be a Jew.

Yet those born Jewish also possess the ability to inspire. More than a century ago, a brilliant student entered Harvard Law School at the age of 19. He was constantly told that he could end up on the Supreme Court one day, if only he would adopt Christianity and abandon his Judaism.

By his final year of Harvard Law School, he became the first Jew ever invited to join the Harvard Honor Society. As he was being inducted, he dramatically walked to the podium and announced "I am sorry that I was born a Jew."

The room erupted in applause and cheers, as his teachers and classmates felt that their efforts had finally born fruit. Then, the brilliant Harvard law student, Louis Brandeis, continued. “I am sorry that I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own.”

Brandeis got it. So did Albert Einstein, who took great pride in his Jewish identity. Tonight, I look out at this congregation and see some who are here for their annual pit stop and others who are regulars. However, we all share one common purpose: visualizing our goals for the coming year and remembering all that kept us from reaching those goals this past year.

We are here to consider where we want to go, how we want to grow in the year 5773. Our Jewish journey involves striving for the goals which will move us closer to the moral, ethical, spiritual and ritual potential which we are all capable of achieving.

The sound of the shofar is meant to rouse us from our routine. Most people who frequent Manhattan regularly no longer stare at The Empire State Building, Times Square and the Broadway marquees. It takes the fresh eyes of a tourist to appreciate how special these places are.

Judaism is a lot like that. Over and over again, the one comment Jews by Choice make when explaining why they chose Judaism is that intellectually and spiritually “it just makes sense!”

Think about it: we have a religious heritage which actually encourages us to study, debate, challenge and question our teachers, our clergy and even our God! We are part of a heritage which hides nothing from public view. We have pretty much realized the transparency which most people say that they want in public life.

As Reform Jews, we possess a two hundred year old heritage which recognizes that we are not one-size-fits-all. While some of us wear head coverings, keep kosher and attend Shabbat services regularly, others do not. The essence of Reform Judaism is not how much or how little we do. Rather, it is making *an informed choice* as to which observances we will follow and which we do not wish to make a part of our lives.

Simply saying that one is a Reform Jew is not a justification to avoid any traditional or modern Jewish ritual, ethical, moral or spiritual practice. Reform Judaism is not an easy way out for wishy-washy Jews.

Rather, Reform Judaism offers us the right, the responsibility and the privilege to decide for ourselves how to best make the teachings of

Judaism relevant in our own lives. If we did it properly, we enter 5773 closer to our Jewish potential than when we began 5772.

I have often said that many people view religion negatively because it places limits on their freedom. Most of us don't like being told what we can and cannot do.

And yet, the new population study of the New York metropolitan Jewish community reveals that the largest groups are now those who call themselves "Orthodox" and those who call themselves "just Jewish."

Thus, while almost a third of all New York area Jews resist the idea of Judaism placing any limits on their actions, an equal number is drawn to the Jewish denomination placing the most limits on their actions.

Frankly, I am not surprised. For while a high birthrate is one obvious reason for growth in the Orthodox community, many others become Orthodox by choice. In its multiple manifestations, Orthodox Judaism is very clear about what it stands for. Agree with it or not, it is unapologetic and advances a clear purpose.

By contrast, Conservative Judaism has seen its numbers plummet in recent decades due to its fundamental inability to define itself.

We in Reform Judaism have seen our numbers decrease to a lesser extent. I believe that this is less due to our ability to define ourselves and more due to dreadfully dull services in many locations led by clergy who often don't believe the words they are praying.

Of course, I like to think that we are an exception here at Beth Am and that this is why we are the only Reform congregation in Rockland County to have experienced significant growth in the past twenty five years.

Synagogues, like people, must constantly reexamine and recalculate their Jewish journeys in order to succeed. One of the places we do this is our Ritual Committee, which constantly evaluates how we can best express our Jewish values through our worship services. In the year ahead, our Ritual committee will examine which prayer book can best help us to reach our worship goals so that we remain fresh and avoid becoming stagnant.

As individuals, we need to do the same. And so, on this day when the subject of reaching our highest self and our loftiest goals is central in our thinking, I ask you to look anew at a handful of Jewish practices to integrate into your lives. If they are already part of your routine, mazel tov! If not, give them a try. You may discover that some or all of these

actions bring greater purpose and meaning to your life than you believed was possible years ago.

First and foremost, even if it isn't over gefilte fish and chicken, light Shabbat candles and recite the blessings over the wine or grape juice and the challah. Perhaps no Jewish ritual provides a greater reward in two minutes than celebrating the beginning of Shabbat, regardless of whether it is done alone or with other family members and friends.

Learn the blessings and make sure that everyone in your household knows the blessings. It takes so little to create this bond with our people and our heritage. On our Jewish journey, whether we are nine years old or ninety years old, this is absolutely step number one.

For those who don't read Hebrew, use the laminated transliterations of the Hebrew prayers and songs which sit in the lobby bookcase. We want everyone actively participating in our services as congregants, not sitting there watching and listening as an audience.

Come to our joyous Simkhat Torah service three weeks from tonight, whether or not you have kids at home. Everyone is guaranteed to have a great time and to hold onto the Torah.

Judaism is more meaningful when we mix the majesty of the High Holy Days with the fun of Simkhat Torah, Purim and other Jewish festive days, including Shabbat. There is no rule stating that religion in general and Judaism, in particular, need to be dull and boring.

Plan a real seder this year, don't just settle for having a nice meal. It is a lot easier and far more rewarding than you can ever imagine.

If you're Jewish and single, don't fight it, just go on JDate, even if you have been there before and left. 50% of the couples I marry and 50% of the couples married by other rabbis I know, met there and the percentage has been rising every year for a decade. If you're a Temple member, we will even pay for your three month membership if you contact me in the next thirty days.

Go without your phone, computer or electronic device for the next 24 hours and on Yom Kippur and that includes any of you who are trying to stealthily text or go online during the service.

Finally, if you are not already doing this, help out with a Temple program a few times a year. You don't need to be an expert to be of value to the community; we just need people willing to give a little time to make a big difference.

And above all, one of the fundamental principles of all of our Jewish journeys should be to aim high. We dare not settle for mediocrity in our relationships and in our actions. We can do better, we can be better.

A few days ago, I met five new Jews, ranging from a five year old Chinese boy with the biggest smile you can imagine, to a young man from the Dominican Republic who has not found a mate, but has found his spiritual place in Judaism. I met people about to be married and those who have been married for many years.

Our Jewish community is a mosaic of unique and fascinating stories and journeys. This Rosh Hashana, each of us has the opportunity to renew and refresh our own Jewish journey. We all have the ability to rediscover our Jewish groove. Every Jewish act we perform elevates us as individuals; every act of giving of ourselves improves our community as an act of tikkun olam, repairing the world.

On our journeys this year as individuals, families and as a congregation, may we reach for and discover new and meaningful destinations. May we also rediscover and appreciate anew some of the places and people we once knew and have since taken for granted.

**May 5773 be a year filled with insight, growth and betterment for us all and
from us all. AMEN**