

## *The Double-Edged Power of Beginnings*

Where should we begin?

This is the name of one of my favorite podcasts, a marriage counseling podcast by relationship guru Esther Perel.

One of her theories, as powerful as it is obvious as it is hard to actually implement, is the idea that so much of our orientation and our feelings in our interpersonal relationships come from the framing we place on our reality. How we tell our story, and in, fact, where we begin it.

So when she sits down with a couple and asks them, “So, where should we begin?”, she is asking them a deep question. What do you see as your starting point? When things started to go downhill? Or the fight you had last night? What about when you fell in love? Or when you decided to spend your lives together? And – what would a new beginning look like? That didn’t deny the past, but wasn’t held back by it, either? Is it possible? Can we begin now?

Of course, there is no one answer. We have many beginnings, in every relationship. Indeed, in a sense, there is no beginning.

And yet, we are drawn to certain beginnings. Beginnings loom large for us even if they are hard to identify or fully define. Sometimes they are helpful for us, and sometimes they aren’t.

And Jews, perhaps all people, are obsessed with beginnings. Our Torah begins with the word, “In the beginning” – even though it didn’t have to! Our Mishnah and Gemara begin with the question, “When do we begin saying Shema at the beginning of the new day?” The Shulhan Arukh begins with how we should behave when we get up in the morning.

What do beginnings offer us? How do they help us, and how do they constrain us? And while that is certainly a relevant question to ask this Rosh Hashanah, this day of the beginning of the world, I also want to ask why it’s an important question. Why is understanding our relationship to beginnings critical to having this year be better than last, no matter what the year ahead brings?

Where should we begin?

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I want to begin (and of course this is already my second beginning, at least!) by asking in what way today is a beginning.

Is it the beginning of the year?

Mishnah RH 1:1

אַרְבַּעַה רֵאשִׁי שָׁנִים הֵם. בְּאֶחָד בְּנִסָּן רֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה לְמַלְכִים וְלְרִגְלִים. בְּאֶחָד בְּאֵלוּל רֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה לְמַעֲשֵׂר  
בְּהֵמָה. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אוֹמְרִים, בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרִי. בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרִי רֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה לְשָׁנִים וְלַשְּׁמִטָּה

וְלַיּוֹבְלוֹת, לְנִטְיָעָה וְלִירְקוֹת. בְּאַחַד בְּשָׁבָט, רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְאֵילָן, קְדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי. בֵּית הַלֵּל אוֹמְרִים,  
בְּחֻמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ:

So it's one of four beginnings of the year. It's a beginning for counting years and for various agricultural calculations.

And if I asked you in what sense it is the beginning of the year, you would tell me it is the anniversary of the creation of the world.

Which, of course, is a debate. As the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (10b-11a) records, ר' אליעזר ר' אומר בתשרי נברא העולם... ר' יהושע אומר בניסן נברא העולם. R Eliezer understands the world to have been created in Tishrei, but R Yehoshua believes it was created in Nisan.

But let's follow R Eliezer's opinion that the world was created in Tishrei. So today is the beginning of the world. It's absolute ground zero – the anniversary of the beginning of everything, right?

Wrong again. A different midrash clarifies R' Eliezer's position (Vayikra Rabbah 29:1/PDR"K 23:1):

תִּנִּי בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בְּעֶשְׂרִים וְחֻמְשָׁה בְּאֵילּוּל נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם

Famously, we know that today is not the anniversary of Day 1 of creation, but rather Day 6. The birthday of the world passed by utterly unnoticed on the 25th of Elul, last Wednesday. We didn't even omit Tachanun to mark the beginning of the world! Today is the anniversary of the creation of us – human beings.

So today is a beginning only insofar as it is the beginning of human history. But still – the first human to be created – there are fewer greater beginnings than that!

But the non-beginningness of these beginnings is not yet over. Now the rabbis reach their most daring conclusion, refuting even this most fundamental belief that our world is the first. They go back to אחד יום בקר ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד (Bereishit Rabbah 3:7):

"א"ר יהודה בר' סימון: יהי ערב אין כתיב כאן אלא 'ויהי ערב', כי מאחר שלא היה עדיין שמש בעולם - ערב ובוקר מניין? אמר ר' אבהו: מכאן שהיה סדר זמנים קודם לזה, מלמד שהיה בורא עולמות ומחריבן, עד שברא את אלו ואמר דין הניין לי ודין לא הניין לי (אלה טובים לי ואלה לא טובים לי)".

The Torah doesn't say, at the eve of creation, let there be evening, but rather, "and there was evening". But if evening refers to the setting of the sun, and there was not even sun or light yet at that moment, what does it mean? It means something came before the beginning. Entire worlds, created and destroyed, before the so-called beginning we are claiming to celebrate today.

I take us through this set of texts and ideas not to be pedantic, but rather to truly drive home the basic point: beginnings are almost never beginnings. They are always preceded by something. They are, almost, arbitrary, artificial, contrived.

So why bother with beginnings? Let's not have 4 Rosh Hashanahs, let's have zero. Let's try our best every single day and blow shofar from time to time when we need it and get on with our lives!

The answer is that arbitrary, artificial and contrived are not bad words! They can be good things – opportunities – even if they're not "real".

Because the question to ask about beginnings is not whether they are real, but whether they help us be better people!

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We are here in shul because we feel something today, on Rosh Hashanah. We feel the power of beginnings.

We feel what the Ramban tells us in Parashat Bereishit (2:3) that the whole future of the world is embedded in the 6 days of creation. The DNA is in the very beginning, and everything flows, if not predetermined then somehow directed, from the experience of the beginning. So beginnings are so critical because they set us on a path that gets harder to veer from once we start. They lock us in a little bit, for the good or the bad – so they are high stakes.

We feel what the Lubavitcher Rebbe tells us, in a speech delivered on Rosh Hashanah night 1981, when he explained that the reason that we celebrate Rosh Hashanah on the anniversary of the 6th day of creation is because it was on that day that the infinite potential of the world – to change and grow and evolve and bring God's presence into it – that infinite potential was created with – in – us! And so beginnings are so critical because they bring us in close touch with our power, our capacity to do something new and different and world-changing. That sense of power and possibility is built into every beginning.

We feel in our kishkes that little rush you get just when you hear someone say the words:

"Let's begin."

It's the feeling described by the words Bernie chanted yesterday morning in the opening piyyut, the reshut, to the Shoharit Amidah's repetition. It's a piyyut that ends with a play on words – "b'et at hil" – at the time that I begin. But the word "athil", I begin, is broken into two words – "at" and "hil". At = here comes, and hil = trembling.

So "I shall begin" also means, "the trembling comes." And that's often really true – whether butterflies or nervous energy or even excitement. Beginnings come with the trembling of our power and the high-stakes of starting down a path that gets harder to change as it goes.

That is extremely powerful, and we should utilize that power – the power of beginnings.

But I have a confession to make – sometimes that very power is crippling for me. It actually holds me back from starting something new or trying something different.

Let me illustrate with a story.

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A few weeks ago, we loaned out one of our pasul sifrei Torah for a year, to our member Dr. Joan Salomon, to take with her alongside a fragment of a sefer Torah rescued from the Shoah, to teach schoolchildren about the Holocaust and about Jewish heritage through the Holocaust & Human Rights Education Center.

Our sefer Torah team had a discussion years ago when that sefer Torah was determined to be pasul beyond repair whether to bury it or store it in the aron kodesh for occasional uses. We left it in the aron kodesh, and now I know why. It was waiting for that moment. The Torah has a new beginning. It has a new life.

As Joan and I were carrying the Torah to her car, the thought crossed my mind: I should take a picture and post it to Facebook with a short explanation, or send off a quick email to the Bayit. We should be proud of what we are doing.

But I don't really do that, I thought to myself. I don't post little stories on Facebook or send quick updates about the little things that happen in shul for our greater Bayit and the world, even though this would be a perfect example.

Because if I start it, then I build an expectation. That I have to continue. And based on the past, I am not sure if I can live up to it.

And I have to be so careful of the power of that new beginning. Where it might lead.

And I regret that I didn't take that picture and post that story and share it with the world. If I never posted again, or I just did it once in a while, that would be fine, too. Beginnings don't have to determine everything. They are just beginnings.

I think that's how many of us are with our New Year's Resolutions and even our heshbon hanefesh, our spiritual accountings in this season. Change is hard. And if I start but don't see it through, what was the point?

Sometimes it's hard to start something new because the thing itself is hard to begin. Sometimes it's hard to start something new because it means ending something else in order to start.

But sometimes it's none of that. Sometimes it's hard to begin something new because the power of the beginning gets in the way of actually beginning. The power of the beginning actually makes it hard to begin.

That's the message of Rosh Hashanah and its almost-arbitrariness as a beginning. To remind us that the power of beginnings is still there even if it's not a totally "real" beginning. And so we have to just begin! We can do it!

So don't call it a beginning with a capital B. There are no capital letters in the Hebrew language. It's just a beginning, a getting started. If it doesn't work, start again. And again, and again. God started 1000 times according to one midrash before God got the world God wanted. And that was this world – with all its mess and imperfection.

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So should we plan and strategize what our meaningful changes will be this coming year? Yes!

Should we work on an approach that will maximize our success? Yes!

Should we feel the slight anxiety, that “at hil”, that trembling coming, that if we start, we really should see it through, and we can’t be sure we will? Yes!

Should we let that anxiety stop us from starting? No!

So I want to begin to call my parents more often this year.

And to learn Torah with my children in a more regular way.

And to devote more time to actions for the welfare of Am Yisrael, especially in Eretz Yisrael.

And actions that improve the plight of the world’s most oppressed – the Rohingya people currently suffering genocide, and others around the globe. Even if I’m not sure if – or how – it will even help.

I want our Bayit to begin its homeless shelter, after a renewed round of community conversation.

I want to message to all of you the things we are doing in this very building that don’t always get seen or heard, and invite you to invest more deeply in this space that we share.

I want our Bayit to find more ways to increase the participation – in ritual and other ways – of our children and teens, of women and men, and of all of us, embracing our LGBTQ community.

זֶה הַיּוֹם תְּחִילַת מַעֲשֵׂיךָ זְכוֹרֹן לַיּוֹם רִאשׁוֹן – as we will say shortly in Mussaf in the introduction to the Zikhronot section, today is the beginning of your actions, God, a remembrance of the first day.

Did you hear that? If it’s a remembrance of the first day, then it’s not really the beginning. And if it’s the beginning, then it’s not the remembrance of anything. So which is it?

Today is not just the anniversary of the beginning. Today is the beginning. Today is the beginning.

Beginnings are gifts. That’s why we have so many of them. And they aren’t absolute – that’s why we shouldn’t get bogged down in them. And they are a tool for us to become our best selves. That’s why we should cling to them and make them for ourselves.

And today is the biggest.

And the starting gun is the blast of the shofar.

So are you ready?

Let’s begin.