

Closer to fine.
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2023
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I have been obsessed with the Barbie movie from the moment I heard that Sacramento's very own Greta Gerwig was directing it. I mean obsessed. And let me tell you, the movie did not disappoint. I could teach an entire class on the Jewishness of the Barbie Movie. Oh wait, I did that last Saturday, on Slichot.

However, as much as I loved the movie, there was one scene in particular that spoke to me. This is not a spoiler alert, it's a scene that can be found in the trailers. In this scene, after things start to go awry in Barbie's life she is directed to visit "Weird Barbie," who is apparently the wisest Barbie of them all.

Weird Barbie listens to "Stereotypical Barbie" about the strange existential trip she's going through, as well as the disturbing appearance of a patch of cellulite on her leg and her feet having gone flat, and Weird Barbie tells her she has two choices. She holds up a pink high heel in her right hand, and a Birkenstock in her left and says:

"You can go back to your regular life, or know the secrets of the universe.
The choice is now yours."

Not surprisingly, stereotypical Barbie wants to go back to her old, but perfect life, where every day is the best day ever, and cellulite is a myth and high heels are comfortable. But much to her dismay, Weird Barbie tells her, she doesn't actually have a choice, she HAS to go into the real world and look for the truth. If she wants that wonderful life back, there are things she has to do, things she has to learn, in order to make it happen.

First of all, how much do you think that I loved that her life choices were represented by shoes? Yes, I loved it that much. Just ask the Cantor how many texts she got from me about the movie.

But secondly, how appropriate. She was being asked to choose between a decorative life and a real one.

At Rosh Hashanah, we are given a similar choice. We are asked if we want to live a life of materialism or meaning, to sleepwalk through our days or to pursue spiritual and intellectual consciousness. High heel or Birkenstock. Plastic or human.

At the High Holidays we are encouraged to examine what it means to each of us to be human. What is demanded of us is not to strive to live a perfect life, just a better one.

Of course there is a certain appeal to the life represented by the pink pump in the movie. A life where all we see is what is pretty and pleasant. A life where we don't have to worry about the consequences of our choices. A life where we think that tears and pain don't exist. A life of childlike innocence. A virtual garden of Eden if you will.

But humans don't live in the Garden of Eden, we were kicked out and forced to live in the real world. A world that can be complicated, and scary, and at times painful. A world where cellulite is all too real, and

wearing high heels every day really hurts, and there is war, and famine, refugees and homelessness. Our world is far from picture perfect.

But the real world also contains opportunities for connection and for meaning. In the real world, tears don't just represent pain, but also joy. In the real world no one lives forever.

However, it is that very temporal nature of the real world that makes life so meaningful and precious. It's what makes us reach out to one another to offer help and healing to those who need it.

In the movie, Barbie tries to reach for the pretty pink heel – symbolizing ignorance passivity, and superficiality. And why wouldn't she? She's a child's toy, an empty vessel designed to contain the dreams of others.

But we, we are not toys, or empty vessels, we are humans, and by nature we want to seek meaning from our lives, and to understand why bad things happen. Humans are, as the newly enlightened Barbie realized, not only the ones who do the dreaming and the creating, but also the living and the dying.

Year after year at the High Holidays, we are reminded that we are the designers of our own destiny. We have choices, a superficial life or a meaningful life?

And this choice isn't made just once, but again and again, day after day, year after year. Life is like a corkscrew with the same situations and questions coming back again and again as we enter each new stage of life.

And on each and every Rosh HaShana we are given another opportunity to try again to do better than we did in the year before, a chance to become a better, truer, version of who we hope to be.

Each year we re-read the same Torah, offer the same High Holiday prayers, but each year the Torah and the prayers sound a little different. Not because they have changed, but because we have changed.

Our sacred text is meant to be a mirror we hold up to our lives. And because our lives are constantly changing, then what is reflected in the mirror will be different each time we look into it.

And so, every year we come back to this place, reading the same prayers, hearing the same Torah portions chanted, the same melodies, but hopefully we experience these holy days with fresh eyes, looking for something new, something different that we didn't see before. Because what we need from this place, and what we can offer others, is, and should be, different, year to year.

And that is part of the beauty of Judaism. Judaism doesn't believe there is only one truth. We are all humans, but each one of us is exquisitely unique, and constantly evolving. And what is true and necessary for us now, may not be what we need next year.

I know that many of you are wondering "but Rabbi, how does one live a meaningful life?"

I'm so glad you asked!

First of all, simply by being here tonight, you're already on the right path. By being with all of us this evening, it means that you see your life as being connected with others, not just those of us here right now, but also with the generations that have come before, and who will God-willing, come after us. It is to see yourself as part of something that is more important than just yourself.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that while prayer might not save us, it makes us worth saving. By that he meant that God is not in the heavens listening to every prayer we make, but rather, when we become open to the prayers we say, we are being given a pathway to live a better life.

When we come to services, the prayers are meant to remind us of our core values, remind us how to engage in the world, to care for one another, and to express gratitude for what we already have.

That's step 1 for a meaningful life. Step 2 is going out and living according to those values and beliefs. And that is not always easy. That's why our sanctuaries are supposed to have windows, so we don't lose track of the outside world, and we connect what we do in here, with what we are supposed to do out there.

Our synagogue provides us with many ways to begin to live a life of substance. Through the Brotherhood and WBI and our Caring Community Committees, we are given an opportunity to reach out to each other, creating connections and friendships, supporting each other during difficult and joyous times.

And for those of us whose families live far away, these connections can enrich our lives by creating a sense of family, and a sense of belonging, here in Sacramento.

And through our many social action committees, we can go out into the larger community and work together with other like minded groups to repair that which is broken in our world, whether that is literally feeding and housing the hungry and the unhoused, welcoming the refugee and the immigrant, or to try to change institutional racism, or fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, and for reproductive rights. There are so many ways to begin to fix our corner of the world.

And when we come together to learn and to study, we find that the horizon of what is possible opens up before our very eyes. Just like when we come together for services, when we come together to study, we can discover new ways to engage in the world for the good.

In some ways the Barbie movie is a more optimistic retelling of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The movie teaches us that leaving Eden was not an expulsion, it was a choice.

To live a perfect day over and over again takes away our sense of awe and gratitude. And to live forever means not having the joy of welcoming a new life into the world, or being able to savor a new experience.

So called perfection can blind our eyes to the beauty to be found in laugh lines and wrinkles spent from years of truly living.

And would we love so deeply, or live so passionately, if we weren't fueled by an understanding that our time on earth is temporary?

Instead of a perpetual Garden of Eden, God gave us something better. God gave us a broken world, as well as the knowledge of how to fix it. And most of all, God gave us free will, the choice on whether or not we want to act on that knowledge.

Our High Holiday liturgy and torah readings remind us that life can be messy, complicated, overwhelming and even painful. But it can also be healing, and forgiving, and filled with love.

When we apologize for our wrong doings we are reminded that our actions have an impact on ourselves, on each other, and even on the world.

And we are reminded that even when we try our very best, we can still make mistakes.

But we are also taught that it's never too late to try again, to do better and work towards being a better version of who we are now.

And most of all, we are reminded at this time of year that we have choices to make; between life and death, between a world that is better because of what we do, or a world that is harmed by our actions, we are given the choice to live a superficial life 🏠 or a life of meaning 🌱.

The choice is now yours.

Shana tova u'metuka – may it be a good year, a sweet year, a meaningful year.