

**Sermon – *Be Better***  
Rosh Hashanah 5780  
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In the spirit of confessing our sins on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I have yet another confession to make: I have not always been a “good Jew.” I have not always given tzedekah; I have not always treated the stranger with kindness; I have not always kept kosher; I have not always observed Shabbat. However, over time, and especially since I was in college, I have become a better Jew. Truthfully, I think I have become a better person. No doubt, I still have work to do (my wife and my parents who are here today can attest to that; my favorite in-laws, on the other hand, will tell them otherwise). But overall, becoming a more engaged Jew has made me a better Jew, and a better person. The wisdom of our tradition, the rituals of our religion, and the tenets of our faith have all made me a better person. I care more deeply about others, I stop to recognize the beauty of the world around me, and I treat my mind and my body with respect. I credit all of this to living a more engaged Jewish life. Judaism has helped me to become more aspirational—to look towards the future with lofty and ambitious goals, and work towards achieving them. Judaism helped me to define more clearly the person that I want to become. That is why the enterprise of Jewish life is so valuable to me, and that is why I am so passionate about and committed to sharing it with others.

Jewish life is not the only place where people learn to be aspirational, which brings me to reflect upon the gym. Over the summer I read a *d'var Torah* from Rabbi Juan Mejia of Oklahoma City. He points out that committed gym-goers engage in repetitive actions, even uncomfortable ones, because the gym has “succeeded in creating a more vivid picture of the end goal.” People know what they are working towards—they have an image of the goal in mind. The espousal of this aspirational perspective has helped fitness institutions thrive. Affiliation

with boutique clubs like CrossFit, SoulCycle, Flywheel, and Equinox, has increased. Why have people transformed their yoga studio into their temples, and their Crossfit Box into their sanctuary? Because the gym offers people the opportunity to *be better*. They say: Join us, and we'll make you better. Who wouldn't be enticed by that offer?

Jewish institutions could learn a thing or two from the gym. Just as I know that the gym is good for you, so too I believe that Judaism is good for you. Judaism, like the gym, can make you better. The problem is, we in positions of Jewish communal leadership have not historically done a great job of marketing that idea. We are good at discussing the past, but we have not always shared an articulated vision for the future. I believe that a revitalized model of Judaism, that an aspirational Judaism, can help us *be better*: better partners, better children, better parents, better people. Judaism compels us to challenge ourselves, adopt new routines, and become better versions of ourselves. Jewish life, like the gym, is aspirational, it is about trying to be better.

In *halakhah*, Jewish law, there are two interdependent concepts known as *l'hatchila* and *b'di'eved* (also pronounced *b'di'avad*). The former means “at the outset” whereas the latter means “after the fact.” Typically, the law at the outset is stringent, whereas the law after the fact is lenient. For example, Rabbi Moshe Isserles rules in the *Shulkhan Aruch*, our authoritative legal code, that, at the outset, it is forbidden for Ashkenazic Jews to eat *kitniyot* on Passover. However, if *kitniyot* were to accidentally fall into the food that you were preparing, then, after the fact, this would not render the food forbidden. At the outset the law is stringent, but after the fact, it is lenient. Another example: At the outset, Hanukkah candles should burn for at least thirty minutes. Therefore, be careful to place the *hanukkiyah* in a place where the candles will not be blown out from the wind. We *aspire* to create the ideal conditions to succeed.

Nevertheless, if, after the fact, those candles go out in fewer than 30 minutes, we need not rekindle them.

These concepts of Jewish law make sense for a lived religion. If we fall short of our intended goal or if we make a mistake, we should not obsess over it. Learn from it, and aspire to do better in the future. Judaism tells us that we should set lofty goals for ourselves. We must have in mind the vivid portrait of the ideal—that's *l'hatchila*. And if and when we fall short of it, do not lower your standards or diminish your self-image. Instead, try harder next time, *b'di'avad*. *Aspire* to do better.

Jewish theology is also aspirational. When Moses meets God at the Burning Bush, he asks, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is God’s name?’ what shall I say to them?” God replies, “אֲנִי הוּא אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי, I will be what I will be” or “I will be-there howsoever I will be-there.”<sup>1</sup> God *is* and *will be* whatever the Israelites will need God to be. The Talmud (Berakhot 9b) reads God’s words as shorthand for, “Just as I will be with the Israelites during this difficulty, so too will I be with them in future ones.” No individual, or nation, is immune from trials and tribulations. The Jewish people have known suffering, and here God tells Moses to reassure the people: In the future, I will be there with them.

The same is true for us today. As we face challenges, individually and collectively, God is with us. Aspirational Judaism compels us to remember that just as God has helped us in the past, so too will we be helped in the future. In the modern era, we have seen the specter of antisemitism appear yet again. Faith that God is and will be with us does not mean that we sit back and wait for deliverance. Rather, we must be God’s agents in this world and unequivocally

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:13-14; translations from JPS & Everett Fox.

condemn all instances of antisemitism, fighting against those who threaten our lives and our way of life. And, simultaneously, we must be future-focused. We cannot be paralyzed by fear of the past or present. We were warned by one of the greatest Jewish historians of the 20th century, Salo Baron, against what he called the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history.” The story of Judaism cannot and should not be told as a series of unfortunate events. Not only would such a history be utterly lacking in nuance, but it would also be detrimental to the Jewish spirit.

Yet we must be honest: Antisemitism has undoubtedly reemerged—in Charlottesville and in Pittsburgh. In Deborah Lipstadt’s most recent book, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, she ominously included these words in her “Note to the Reader:” “Sadly, given the unending saga that is antisemitism, I feel comfortable predicting that by the time this book appears there will have been new examples of antisemitism that should have been part of the narrative.”<sup>2</sup> How right she was. She wrote those words in August 2018, months *before* the nightmare of Pittsburgh. Her book is a sobering account of the global rise of antisemitism and how we should address it. Her conclusion, most importantly, harkens back to the warning of Baron: When we tell our story as a Jewish community, we must balance our “oys” with our “joys.” We must not define ourselves eternally as victims. We may be victims in particular instances, but at our core, we are much more than that.

In his book, *Future Tense*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warns us about obsessing over the dark chapters of the past. He opines, “The generation that came of age in the 1980s was not faced with Gentile disdain, but it was obsessed by the Holocaust. American Jews dedicated themselves to building Holocaust memorials, funding Holocaust programmes at universities, writing books about it, organising Holocaust seminars, and taking as their credo ‘Never Again’.” *The generation*

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, p. xii.

*of American Jews raised on a diet of Holocaust education is deciding, at the rate of one in two, not to hand on Jewish identity to their children.* For the most obvious reason: if people died in the Holocaust because their grandparents were Jewish, the best way of ensuring that your grandchildren will not die is to stop being Jewish.”<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Sacks is strikingly critical of the lachrymose conception of Jewish history. When we make the darkest chapters of our past the most important chapters of the present, we do damage to the Jewish community. We have been through trials and tribulations, but to make victimhood our core narrative is to let the antisemites win. Being educated about the past is different than being obsessed with the past.

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that we abandon Holocaust education, or that we ignore incidents of antisemitism. Rather, I am agreeing with Salo Baron, with Deborah Lipstadt, and with Rabbi Sacks—all significant Jewish historians and thought-leaders of the 20th and 21st centuries. I am suggesting that our primary focus must be on the future, with a keen awareness and deep understanding of the past. The promise that God made to Moses at the Burning Bush is eternal—*אֲנִי אֶשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה*, God will be with us whenever we need God, and God will be whatever we need God to be. That is our encouragement to move forward, to keep going, to dream bigger, to work towards the fulfillment of that vivid portrait we are painting. Cultivating faith in God is what enables us to move forward to reaching our goals. It is what provides the momentum to push on, even during life’s more challenging moments.

In Pirkei Avot, the Wisdom of our Sages, Akavia ben Mehalalel teaches: Consider [these] three things and you will not fall into transgression—know when you came, whither you are going, and before Whom you will eventually have to give an accounting.<sup>4</sup> You must know the past, and you must also have a clear understanding of where you are going in the future. And, all

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Avot 3:1.

the while know that there is something of great magnitude in the background. God's Presence in one's life is eternal, if we seek those moments and notice them. The main task of our lives, however, is to aspire towards the future; to work on making ourselves better.

As Jews, we often look to the past. We spend each Saturday morning reading narratives in an ancient language, written upon a scroll, from a place and time that *could feel* terribly distant. It is easy to fall prey to the trap of being stuck in the past, of holding on to a Judaism of the past that is romanticized and misunderstood. Which is why it is so important for Jewish communities today, regardless of where they fall on the ideological spectrum, to harness the power of our tradition to make us better for the future.

Harnessing that power requires us to know the past well; not to be obsess over it, but to know it, to understand it, and to internalize it. An awareness of who we are as a Jewish community is vital if we are to look towards the future, aspiring to be better. To explain this, I turn to the theories and ideas posited by Yuval Noah Harari in his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harari asserts that all societies developed what he calls "myths," so that they could coexist, cooperate, communicate, and thrive. These myths are not nonsensical fairy tales or corrupting beliefs, but narratives, ideas, and values that tied together individuals who did not know each other, and yet lived within the same society. Harari suggests that these myths are the foundation of what he calls "imagined orders." Examples of imagined orders include nation-states, religions, cultures, and civilizations.

Harari illustrates this idea with an example. The Declaration of Independence is a myth, in this technical use of the word. It is one of the most important myths of the imagined order of the United States. There is nothing false, fake, or fabricated about this myth. The myth is not nonsensical. Rather, it is essential to our story in the imagined order of America. He writes that

“We believe in a particular order not because it is objectively true, but because believing in it enables us to cooperate effectively and forge a better society.”<sup>5</sup> We do not honor the Declaration of Independence because of the past. Rather, we honor this document because it reflects the values and vision that help us aspire for a better future. Imagined orders, like the United States, are aspirational. They put forth a vision of the future and use their foundational myths to reach towards that ideal future. Judaism too is an imagined order. Judaism compels us to aspire for a better future, while establishing a solid foundation with our myths. How will we use them to chart the course of our future? What can the Jewish stories of our past tell us about the aspirations we hold for the future?

The stories of the Jewish people can be found in primarily two places: in the holy texts of our tradition and in the recorded history of our people. Indeed, there is some overlap, but I would identify these two arenas as the sources of our foundational myths. Our holy texts include the Tanakh, or the Hebrew Bible, and the hundreds of years of rabbinic teachings which followed in the Mishnah, the Talmud, the *midrashim*, and in other sacred texts. For thousands of years we have relied upon the teachings of these works to guide our behavior, our practices, and our beliefs. They are not just an object of study, but are meant to be implemented in our daily lives.

Then there is our recorded history, such as the story of Israel. The two millennia of yearning for redemption was an aspirational perspective. Even with the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the aspirations of Israel and Zionism were not fully realized. In our liturgy we refer to Israel as ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו, the *beginning* of the *flowering* of our redemption. The foundation of the State is only the very beginning. We still aspire for Israel to achieve more, to be better. Our stories are our collective memory, and they help to support our “imagined order.”

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<sup>5</sup> Harari, p. 110.

They help us to cooperate and to work towards the betterment of ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Not only must we be aspirational as a Jewish community, but we must also be aspirational as Jewish individuals. We recommit ourselves to Judaism each year because we aspire to better Jews, and I believe that doing so can make us better people. If we aspire to more faithfully observe and celebrate Shabbat, then we can learn to be better about time-management. If we aspire to give tzedakah more regularly, then we can learn to be more mindful of the needs of other human beings. If we aspire to differentiate in our diets by keeping kosher, then we can learn to be more attentive to detail. Aspiring to be better as individuals in our Jewish practices will undoubtedly help us become better people overall.

I want to help you *be better*. I want our community members to commit to being a part of B'nai Israel because Jewish life at B'nai Israel helps you become a better parent, better sibling, a better child, a better partner, a better friend, a better person. We need your help to paint the vivid picture of what that looks like. Together, we have to dream, to imagine, to aspire. And together we will find ways to help you along your path to that goal. We will help motivate you, inspire you, and thereby maintain the momentum needed to move forward towards your aspirations for yourself. Judaism has the power to do that—it has done that for generations of Jews throughout the world. We need to do better, today.

In the coming months, we will embark on a Listening Tour to hear from you. We want to hear about you so that we can collaborate on painting the picture of our future. And then we need you to commit, to ask more of yourself, to determine that you will dedicate time and energy to the process of becoming better, just as you dedicate time and energy to the gym or to any other worthy endeavor.

Near the end of the Torah, Moses commands the people to erect stones atop Mount Ebal, and on these stones they are to inscribe **בְּאֵר הַיָּטֵב**, most distinctly and articulately, the words of the Torah. This was to be that aspirational portrait for the Israelites. All who pass by these stones should be able to read them and understand them. All who pass by should be able to internalize the ancient yet timeless wisdom of the Torah and the Jewish people. The stones were to be the story, the narrative, the myth, and Judaism would be the imagined order that helped the nations of the world cooperate and create a more perfect world. That is our task as individuals, and it is our task as a community—to gather the wisdom of our past and propel it into the future, dreaming, imagining, and aspiring together to become the best that we can be. *Shanah tovah umetuka*. Wishing you a good and sweet year, filled with learning, reflecting, dreaming, and becoming better.