

## REINVENTION SERMON

### ROSH HASHANA EVE, 5776

“In the afterlife you are judged not against other people, but against yourself.

Specifically, you are judged against what you could have been.

So the afterworld is much like the present world, but it now includes all the yous that you could have been. In an elevator you might meet

more successful versions of yourself...But soon you fall victim to intimidation.

These yous are not really you, they are better than you.

They made smarter choices, worked harder, invested the extra effort

into pushing on closed doors. These doors eventually broke open for them and allowed their lives to splash out in colorful new directions...

they played your cards better. In their parallel lives, they made better decisions, avoided moral lapses, did not give up on love so easily. They worked harder than you did to correct their mistakes and apologized more often.

Eventually you cannot stand hanging around these better yous.

You discover you’ve never felt more competitive with anyone in your life.”

This fanciful story is from David Eagleman’s book, *Sum*. It echoes a well-known Hassidic story. Once Rabbi Zusya came to his students crying.

“Zusya, what’s the matter?” they asked. He responded:

“I learned what question God will ask me when I die.”

“But Zusya,” they said, “you are pious. You are a scholar and you are humble.

You have helped so many people. What question about your life

could be so terrifying?” Zusya replied: “God will not ask me,

Why were you not more like Abraham? Nor will God ask me,

Why were you not more like Moses?

God will ask me, Why were you not more like Zusya?”

Both these stories emphasize how important it is to try and be our best selves.

Rosh Hashana is a perfect time to contemplate how we might go about

reaching for those personal goals that have eluded us until now.

After all, Rosh Hashana is described in our liturgy as the day the world

was created<sup>1</sup>. As we celebrate the creation of the world,

why not give ourselves the opportunity for renewal, recreation, and reinvention.

Of course, this is a tall order. It is difficult to get out of our comfort zone.

We may not feel particularly fulfilled in the work we do,

some of our relationships may feel stale, we may still have not signed up for

that wonderful class we have promised ourselves to take – but our routines,

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Brown, *Spiritual Boredom*, p. 163.

as boring as they may be or as unexciting as they may have become,  
are familiar to us. Why rock the boat or fix what ain't broken?

Change is hard. So I would like to propose some ways that we might jog the mind,  
shake us out of our lethargy, rekindle some of that fire we once had.

We might begin with the call of the shofar which is meant to awaken us.

This year's new High Holy Day prayer book gives us three separate occasions  
to heed its cry, as you will discover tomorrow. So too, confessing our sins  
throughout the 10 Days of Awe helps to cleanse us, offering us the possibility  
of a clean slate from which to restart the year.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro suggests that we think of Rosh Hashanah as  
Head Changing Day. After all, "rosh" does mean "head."

He says: "You can't have a new year with an old head.

So if you want a new year, you are going to need to get a new head.

A new head is a story-free head. Your stories define you.

If your stories are positive and loving, then you are optimistic  
and loving. If your stories are negative and fearful,

then you are angry and afraid...however, stories are not reality.

A new head is story-free...If you want a new head, identify the stories

you carry with you. Ask yourself: 'Am I absolutely certain this story is true?'

'How does telling this story make me feel?'"

In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Eliezer, offers another approach:

He tells us we should repent the day before we die.

Of course, we don't know what day that will be.

So we must live every day as though it were out last. If this were your last day,

what would you feel the need to do? If this were your last conversation with

your spouse, your friend, your child, is this how you would want to conduct it?

What changes do you need to make in order to be the person

you would like to be?

Saul Kaplan, the Founder and Chief Catalyst of the Business Innovation Factory,

gives us some very practical advice about steps we might take to push ourselves

beyond our habitual mindset and behavior. He tells us: "Reinvention is a journey,

not a destination. It doesn't have to be a scary word...

It's about personal R&D to explore and test new possibilities.

It's about experimenting all the time to uncover latent opportunities.

It's about continuing to strengthen our current selves while simultaneously

working on our future selves by actively engaging in new ideas, environments

and practices. You don't have to stop doing what you're currently doing; you just have to allow yourself the freedom to **try more stuff.**"<sup>2</sup>

And here is some of the "stuff" Kaplan suggests:

**1.** Hang out in places where more collisions with unusual suspects are likely to happen. Stop hanging with usual suspects!

**2.** Create a list of new stuff you've always wanted to try or be able to do.

Start working the list today.

**4.** Attend events you wouldn't normally go to, and really listen and engage.

**5.** Commit to learning something new every day and keep track.

**7.** Have coffee with someone completely new every week.

Someone who has a different point of view and experience from your own.

**8.** Read books and articles from genres you never read. Expand your vocabulary.

Stretch your interests.

**9.** Try new foods. Order something on the menu you've never had before.

Experiment with different foods you haven't tried.

**10.** Go listen to talks on subjects you know nothing about. Ask naïve questions.

**11.** Audit a class in a surprising subject area, the more experiential the better.

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<sup>2</sup> This post originally appeared on [Medium.com](https://medium.com)

**13.** Travel to places you haven't been before and really experience the community. Avoid being a tourist!

**14.** Volunteer on the opposite side of town from where you live.

**15.** Explore art if you're a scientist. Explore science if you're an artist.

Explore both if you're in business!"

In conclusion? "What are we waiting for? Try more stuff."

In her book, *Spiritual Boredom*, Erica Brown, quoting Eleanor Roosevelt, adds:

"Do something that scares you."

Brown also recommends the Harvard School of Education's "Project Zero"

exercises which are meant to stretch the limits of our thinking process.

For example, "ten times two" asks you to look at something,

a painting, for example, and identify ten things you notice.

Then you need to find 10 more.

She says that, "You'll find that this exercise feels torturous until the moment

it feels wonderful. Wonder requires digging deeper, seeing more, and expanding

the way we think."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> P. 158.

In order to begin our New Year with a new mindset, with a changed head,  
I thought we might try a few of the Project Zero exercises.

IMAGE #1 (Egypt Plague): Look at the image quietly for at least 30 seconds.

Let your eyes wander. List 10 words or phrases about any aspect of the picture.

Repeat and try to add 10 more words or phrases to your list.

IMAGE #2 (Moses): What do you think you know about this artwork or topic?

What questions or puzzles do you have? What does the topic or artwork  
make you want to explore?

Image #3 (Mistress with Former Slaves): Choose one of the following 3 questions:

If this artwork is the **beginning** of the story, what might happen next?

If this artwork is the **middle** of the story, what might have happened before?

What might be about to happen?

If this artwork is the **end** of the story, what might the story be?

These exercises are meant to expand your powers of observation,  
pushing you beyond first impressions. They encourage you to use  
your imagination, to look for connections and patterns. They stimulate curiosity.

Becoming our best selves, making full use of the talents we have been given,  
living up to the highest standards in our relations with other people --  
these are the ways we bring holiness into the world.

Then our very lives will become praises of the One Who gave us life,  
of the Eternal God – and our souls will be singing Hallelujah.

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