

Take A Spiritual Selfie & Make Some New Year's Resolutions!

Erev Rosh HaShanah Sermon 5777/ 2016

by Rabbi Lisa Malik, inspired by Rabbis Carl Perkins & Mitchell Wohlberg

(Hold up selfie stick). Can anyone tell me what this is?

If I had asked you that question two years ago most of you would not have known the answer. /Had I asked this question last year, almost everybody under the age of 50 would have known the answer. /This year, I'm guessing that most of you do know the answer, especially if you recently went on a sight-seeing vacation.

Just a few years ago, not only was there no such thing as a "selfie stick," the very word "selfie" did not exist! The word was coined in the early 2000s, but by 2013, selfies had become so widespread that the Oxford English Dictionary gave the word official recognition. The word had to be added to the dictionary because every day, over a million people take a picture of themselves. On Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat alone, 1.5 billion new photos are shared **every day**, which comes out to about 550 billion a year! Everyone from Queen Elizabeth to President Obama has been caught taking selfies.

Now, why do you need a **selfie stick** to take a selfie? Well, you don't, but because the stick allows you to hold the camera further from your body than you otherwise could, you get a better perspective. Your picture is less distorted; you get a better picture of yourself and your surroundings. Selfie sticks have become so popular that the European Union is considering banning them from tourist spots like the Eiffel Tower and the Trevi Fountain. In the States, the Walt Disney Company has already banned selfie-sticks in all of its Disneyland and Disney World theme parks. They are also banned at the Smithsonian Museums, as well as the Museum of Modern Art in NY./ The reason for the selfie-stick ban is that people can get so distracted when they are taking selfies that they don't pay attention to the world around them. They can hurt themselves and they can hurt others, as well. This is a problem.

Personally, **I like the idea of taking selfies**, because I think that it can actually lead us to **pay more attention to ourselves and to the world around us**— which is what the High Holidays is supposed to be about! In the words of Rabbi Carl Perkins, "What is the purpose of the High Holiday experience, if not than to produce one long, multi-media selfie?"

If you were to ask me what the purpose of the High Holiday season is.... why so much time is spent in shul.... why there are so many prayers..... the answer I would give is that **these holy days provide us with the opportunity to take spiritual "selfies"**. Of course, Jewish tradition doesn't call it that. Instead, our tradition asks that we make an "accounting of our souls," known as "**cheshbon nefesh**" in Hebrew. The 10 Days of Repentance that are bracketed by RH & YK, *Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah*, are days on which you are supposed to take 'selfies' to **let you know what you really look like**.

So, today, I'm going to give you a few moments in which to take a "selfie" to see how you look. Let's try an exercise that I learned from Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg:

Stop and think for a moment.....**think of the first 3 words that come to mind in describing yourself.** What adjectives come to mind? ... kind, bright, generous, loving, giving?selfish, petty, mean, lazy, arrogant ? Go ahead ... think about it.

Now, I want you to **think about whether or not you are satisfied with this selfie that you just took of yourself.** Do you wish that one or more of those 3 adjectives did not describe you? Are there perhaps other adjectives that you'd prefer to be descriptive of who you, if not now, then in the future?

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The 3-adjective exercise that I just did with you is one type of selfie that you can take on the High Holidays. But, as you know, most people who take selfies take more than one. So, I invite you to **take another selfie** by asking yourself the following big-picture questions that are part of the HH & daily Jewish prayer service:

*Mah anachnu?*

"What are we?" "Who do we think we are?"

*Meh chayeinu?*

"What is our life?" In other words, "What's it all about? Does our life have purpose?"

*Meh chasdeinu?*

"What is our *chesed*, our loving kindness?" -- "How loving and kind are we, really?"

*Mah tzidkeinu?*

What is our righteousness? -- "How good are we, really?"

And how about our achievements, our successes?

How worthwhile are they, really?

*Mah g'vrurateinu?* What are our strengths?

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Each of us has strengths, but we also have **weaknesses**.

We can be friendly & inclusive; but we can also be cliquey.

We can be easy-going; but we can also be impossible.

We can be calm; but we can also be impatient.

We can be respectful; but we can also be rude.

We can be gentle and generous; but we can also be nasty and selfish.

Now you might be wondering:

What is the point of looking at ourselves so critically? Am I suggesting that we all take selfies just to be reminded of **how imperfect we are?**

The point of looking closely at ourselves is supposed to motivate us to improve ourselves. Engaging in *cheshbon nefesh* (an accounting of the soul) enables us to **see who we are now.**

But this is only a first step of the process of *teshuvah* that you are encouraged to engage in during the High Holidays. After taking a close look at who we are, the next step is to **envision what you can become.**

But *teshuvah* doesn't end there. Next, you need to **resolve to change.** You have to articulate what you are going to do differently in order to achieve your vision.

And, as part of any resolution that you make to improve your character in the year ahead, you are undoubtedly going to have to come up with a **plan of action:** a specific **behavior** or set of behaviors that you can start doing to help bring about the self-improvement that you seek. After all, **actions shape character.**

Being that I am a rabbi and this is a shul, I would like to suggest that your action plan for 5777 include some New Year's Resolutions that are specifically connected to your Jewish identity

HANDOUT List of New Year's Resolutions 5777/ 2016

Focus on resolution #1: Give PRAYER a chance

You can look at the other Jewish New Year's Resolutions that I have suggested on your own: either in shul or at home.

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For now, I want to conclude with a New Year's wish for you:

When you take photos of yourselves with your selfie-sticks, may you be pleased by much of what you see.

But may you also identify areas for **self-improvement** and **spiritual growth** in the new year ahead.

**If you work on at least one New Year's Resolution in 5777, who knows?**

**In one year from now, when we gather together again to usher in the year 5778, you might look even better in that selfie next year than you do right now.**

*Ken yehi ratzon.*

*L'Shanah Tovah u-Metukah.* May you have a good and sweet New Year.

## 7 Jewish New Year's Resolutions Suggested by Rabbi Malik: Pick One For 5777

1-**Give synagogue prayer services a chance.** Many people complain about traditional Jewish prayer services, raising issues such as, "I don't understand Hebrew" and "Why can't I just pray what's in my heart?" / Know that **you are not alone!** Some of these issues are listed and addressed in the purple "**Problems with Prayer**" packet at your seats. Feel free to read this packet during services or during the rabbi's sermon! / As for solutions to problems with prayer, one resolution you can make is to attend **Rabbi Malik's Yom Kippur study session** on October 12, when this topic will be discussed. Another resolution you can make is to participate in **Learners' Minyan**, led by **Cantor Adi Wyner**, on the **4<sup>th</sup> Shabbat of every month.** / Of course, the best way to feel more comfortable in services is to **come to shul more often!** / If you try everything and still feel that prayer isn't working for you, **come to shul anyway;** just don't pray. (Yes, that's what I said!) Come for the D'var Torah (speech about the Torah portion). Come for the community. And, yes, it's OK to come JFK (Just For the Kiddush)!

2- Commit to **educate yourself Jewishly** in the coming year, no matter how old or young you are! Resolve to **study the Torah portion** every week and/or **read at least one Jewish book** per month: whether it's a work of fiction or non-fiction or a book from the Tanach (the Jewish Bible). Or resolve to **learn to read Hebrew** or take one or more **Adult Education** classes this year, perhaps one of our new "**TBA WOW**" ("**WithOut Walls**") offerings. Some classes will be held at the Marlboro Library and other public venues; others classes will be held at congregants' homes in Aberdeen, Colts Neck, Holmdel, Manalapan, and Marlboro.

3-Commit to engage in **more acts of loving kindness (*g'milut chasadim*)**. Participate in TBA's Mitzvah Day and get involved in other activities organized by TBA's Social Action Committee. Consider volunteering to feed the hungry by serving food to people in need at the Bayshore Lunch Program of the Community Church in Keyport. Visit a congregant who is sick or homebound. Volunteer to drive an elderly person to doctor appointments. The next time you get an email with a Care Calendar link, sign up to bring a meal to the family of a congregant who is in need.

4- **Give more tzedakah** in the year ahead and be more purposeful about the way you allocate your donations to different organizations. Think carefully about which *secular* causes you want to support and which causes you want to support in the Jewish community. In addition to giving tzedakah to your synagogue (in the form of membership, Kol Nidrei donations, and participation in shul fundraisers), also consider giving to other Jewish organizations, including the Federation in the Heart of NJ or to one of the many charitable organizations in Israel.

5- **Turn Saturday into Shabbat**, if not fully, then in at least some ways. If you don't already light **Shabbat candles** or say **Kiddush** before Friday night dinner, resolve to start doing these rituals at least once a month, beginning this week! Invite people to your home for Shabbat dinner. Arrange to meet your friends in shul on Shabbat.

6- Pick a **Jewish holiday** that you have never observed before & start observing it to some extent this year. Never built or decorated a **Sukkah**? Resolve to build or decorate one this year or next. Never danced with a Torah or heckled the cantor on **Simchat Torah**? Make this the year that you do!

7- **Become more connected to Israel!** Have you been to Mexico or France, but never been to Israel? Resolve to visit Israel this year! Thirty six (36) members of our community will be embarking on a "**Journey to Israel**" together with Rabbi Malik this November. Whether or not you are participating in this journey or planning a journey of your own, you can still support Israel by becoming involved in TBA's Israel Affairs Committee and by joining the TBA delegation at the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) Policy Conference: **March 26-28, 2017**. You can also support Israel by **buying Israeli products** and by giving **Israel Bonds** as gifts for B'nai Mitzvah, weddings, and other simchas.