

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5782
Shehecheyanu Anyway
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin

One thing that struck me about Temple Beth David back when I was interviewing five years ago is how much it feels like a family. This first impression has stayed with me. Maybe it's the smaller size, maybe it's the cross-section of towns and our efforts to get to know one another, maybe it's how our bright building facilitates gathering and connection, maybe it's just that there are really kind and caring people. I hope that the 25 new families who have recently joined us and the 30 new students in our Shorashim religious school will have the same impression.

For those of you who have been around awhile, you may be familiar with a bit of an inside joke about Past Temple President David Wang. David has the unique distinction of having served as Beth David's president for three years, rather than the usual two- year term, to help manage the rabbinic transition when Rabbi Micah and I arrived. While David was president, he would often recite the *Shehecheyanu* blessing, the primary Jewish blessing over new experiences and joyful moments. There were many firsts and joyful occasions that year for the community and new rabbis. And David never let one go by without offering this blessing or reminding the rabbis to recognize another *Shehecheyanu* moment. With somewhat humorous frequency, David taught us an important lesson.

The *Shehecheyanu* blessing has been recited by Jews for nearly 2,000 years as a way to express our thanksgiving to God for life. The rabbis of the Talmud (Tractate *Berachot*) taught that we say this blessing when doing or experiencing something that happens infrequently, from which one derives pleasure. It is a blessing about being aware and delighting in the moment. This includes the beginning of a holiday, as we recited earlier in our service tonight, and hearing the shofar as we will do tomorrow morning. We say *Shehecheyanu* when we sit in the sukkah, read the megillah, and light candles on Chanukah. This prayer is recited upon the birth of a child, a bar or bat mitzvah, wedding, and conversion. If we build a new house or purchase new dishes or clothes, the Talmud teaches, we also recite *Shehecheyanu*.

In the modern sense, the blessing is also said at any important milestone – a child's first steps, getting a driver's license, retirement, and special anniversaries. Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin writes, "A blessing is an act of transformation. Through our words, the world is brushed with a tincture of the sacred."¹ *"Blessed are You, Adonai our God, for giving us life, sustaining us, and bringing us to this moment."*

If your head is in a similar place as mine, perhaps you are finding it hard to say *Shehecheyanu* this year. Let's face it, the New Year does not feel so joyful. Who could have imagined that the moment would feel like this? How many of us thought back in June, 'This is it... the light at the end of a long and dark tunnel – fully vaccinated and ready to go!' Yet, here we are, with masks back on, many watching services from home, recalculating the level of risk we are willing to take, and dialing back more of our hopes and plans. None of us could have imagined or prepared

¹ *The Tapestry of Jewish Time*

for this colossal upset in our lives. Although it is the season of return, we have not fully returned. We feel sad and disappointed. Perhaps angry. Perhaps anxious.²

We might even think that we don't need the High Holy Days this year. We've already spent the last year and half contemplating life and death, reflecting on what is truly essential, and finding ways to anchor ourselves in a world that is spinning out of control. And yet, there is something deeply powerful about this yearly Jewish ritual. There is comfort in the familiarity of prayer and melody, challah with raisins and apples dipped in honey. We are in it together, even though we are still not together.

We talk about what we will do when the pandemic is over. But we now know that there will only be a new normal. We have learned how to pivot, stretch, and bend. Here is where I think we can draw strength from Jewish tradition. The beauty of Jewish tradition is our ability to straddle the ancient and new. As Jews, we have always adapted to our surroundings and times. Rosh HaShanah is about birth, renewal, awakening and awareness. Rosh HaShanah affirms the uncertainty. Our New Year rituals invite us to let go of our attempts to control our lives, and to focus on our relationships and our presence in the New Year of 5782. As Jews, we say *Shehecheyanu* anyway.³

There is a story about Rabbi Israel Spira of Bluzshov in the Bergen Belson concentration camp. In order to light the Chanukah candles, someone had saved a bit of fat from a meal, another provided a string of clothing for the wick, thus making the first night Chanukah possible. The rabbi chanted the first blessing over the candles. He recited the second blessing for the miracle. Then he paused, looked around, and recited the third blessing – the *Shehecheyanu*. A fellow inmate stopped him and asked: “Rabbi, How could you thank God and say, ‘Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept alive, and has preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season?’ We are surrounded by suffering, darkness and death.”

The rabbi answered, “I, too, hesitated before reciting this blessing. And then I looked around at the faces of so many faithful, living Jews standing in devotion to perform the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah candles. Chanukah itself is about finding light in dark times. In the midst of destruction and suffering there was light and hope. And I decided that this, too, was a *Shehecheyanu* moment.”⁴

Today, we are also barraged with destruction, division, and challenge. With the pandemic, there have been many lost *Shehecheyanu* moments. Yet, amidst loss and disappointment, Judaism affirms that we can find joy and recognize blessing. There have been new babies, new b'nai mitzvah, new marriages. New house projects. New ways of being together. New ways of being apart. New hobbies. New traditions. My colleague Rabbi Sarah Mack writes, “*Shehecheyanu* is about celebrating the light in the middle of the tunnel when we don't know when the light at the end of the tunnel will come.”

² With gratitude to Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz, Congregation B'nai Shalom Westborough, MA

³ Rabbi Leah Berkowitz, Rosh Hashanah *Iyun*

⁴ From *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, Yaffa Eliach

The Talmud teaches that one who sees his friend after thirty days (one month) recites the *Shehecheyanu* blessing. And one who sees his fellow person after a year recites, “Blessed are you Adonai, who revives the dead (*m’chayei ha’meitim*).” What can we learn from this? One, that being apart from our loved ones is really hard. And two, Jewish tradition expresses such profound gratitude for life that we literally say to another person, “Thank God you’re alive.”⁵

I admit that I am a fan of ritual. I find ritual comforting; familiar words and actions provide structure and purpose to the endless flow of time. Jewish tradition teaches that we should aim to recite 100 blessings a day. *Shehecheyanu* is a good place to start. Scholar Vanessa Ochs writes, “In the land of Jewish, there is, in fact, no moment that goes by when there is not some formal Jewish way to behave, interact, mark, respond, bless, or reflect.”⁶

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman’s teaching around ritual speaks to me. He writes, “Without ritual there would be no meaningful use of time... It arranges our life into relatively small packages of moments that matter... Ritual should be viewed as one of the ways in which human beings get at ideas that matter... Picture a package, composed of a gift being packaged and some wrapping paper doing the packaging... By analogy, we can imagine how ideas get wrapped by ritual.”⁷ Can you picture it? We all like receiving gifts. Picture the anticipation of unwrapping the paper to discover what is inside. Similarly, rituals lovingly wrap the special moments in our lives.

Hoffman continues, “Ritual is not just self-satisfying fluff: smells and bells and holding hands and eyes glazed over and closed-off minds. It should be the means to a new kind of truth, a multimedia package that shapes ideas even as it delivers them, an emotional and intellectual form of engaging people in their common future. Good ritual follows a script and gives everyone a part...” In other words, ritual brings us together in important moments. Rituals, like this moment of Rosh Hashanah, like this first *Shehecheyanu* of 5782, create and elevate holiness.

As I conclude tonight, let us consider the three core ideas that are wrapped in the *shehecheyanu* blessing: “*shehecheyanu* – for giving us life; *v’kiyamanu* – for sustaining us; *v’higiyanu laz’man hazeh* – and for bringing us to this moment.” The following three essential questions will accompany us as we enter this High Holy Day season: 1) How do we make life-affirming choices and be thankful for the blessings in our lives? 2) What are the sources of life that sustain us and help us through our days? And 3) Even though it may feel like we haven’t fully made it to a joyful moment in time, how can we be mindful of the gift of time that has been given to us? How will we say *Shehecheyanu* anyway?

We have been granted life. We have been sustained. We have arrived in the New Year of 5782. I pray that we can be ever mindful of these gifts. Over the next ten days, Rabbi Micah and I will look forward to unwrapping this package of the New Year with you, and, reflecting deeply on what is inside: the gift of life.

Please join Batya in offering these sacred and comforting words: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, shehecheyanu, v’kiyamanu, v’higiyanu lazman hazeh*.

⁵ Talmud Berachot 58b

⁶ *The Rituals & Practices of Jewish Life*, Ed. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky & Rabbi Daniel Judson

⁷ *The Art of Public Prayer*