

Taking a Soulfie: Changing from Within
Rosh Hashanah 5778
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If it wasn't yom tov, a holiday, I would be tempted, right now, to take out my cell phone, turn around and take... a selfie. Really. I mean for a rabbi, today is kind of an important day for someone in my profession. Why wouldn't I want to capture this moment in time?

What would I do with my selfie? Would I share it with a few friends? Broadcast it on Facebook? Would I keep it to myself? But I digress...

Want to know what I was doing when I took a real selfie recently?

Well, it all starts with a recent rut I found myself in: a work-out rut. Some of you may be familiar with this constant cycle. You know that you need to work out. You know you should get on that treadmill and you know that once you do get on that treadmill, the likelihood of feeling better about yourself is greater AND the more likely that you'll feel more energetic...however, you can't seem to find the energy to even get on that treadmill.

So I found myself doing this, night after night, day after day, until finally one day I found myself, just by happenstance, in workout clothing: new sneakers, a t-shirt, yoga pants. I took a selfie and then...it all changed.

Can we really change who we are and what we do?
Can we really change the cycles that keep repeating themselves in our lives?
Can we change?

If the answer to that question is an outright "no," then I'm afraid my sermon would end here. Perhaps some of you might like that, but...nice try.

But there are people who believe that we cannot change. There are people who think that once someone is a certain way, they aren't going to be able to change. If they are stingy, they will always be that way. If they are addicts, they are always going to go back to their bad habits of drinking or gambling or being a workaholic.

But, I'd like to point out, that we are a religion that believes in change. We are a faith that strives to do better, to be better. Whether it's regarding climate change or changing ourselves, we believe that redemption, that healing, that change, is possible.

If I didn't think that people could change, I would not be in this business. Because religion and spirituality and Judaism is all about connecting to something greater than us to improve ourselves and the world around us.

So when people say "people won't change" – I think the truth behind their statement is that we cannot change other people. They need to want to change themselves. Sure, you can inspire people. You can give people hope and direction, guidance and compassion. And with the right mix of a person who wants to change and the correct support system, we might begin to see what could be possible.

And so, to those people who say that we cannot change people, I would say "you're right." But, the more relevant question because we cannot change someone else, is: Can we change ourselves? Or, put differently, do you even want to change?

Now when I ask that question, I'm not asking about whether you would like to change a particular scenario that is unfolding in your life. I know that you'd like to change the terminal diagnosis of someone in your circle of friends. I know you'd love to change how someone else is treating you or what they have done to harm you. But I'm not talking about things that are beyond our control. I'm talking about things that we can change for ourselves and about ourselves.

Do you want to change?

I'd like to go out a limb here and venture to guess that if you are in this room on Rosh Hashanah that you believe that you can change and you actually do *want* to change. Or, at least...I hope so. Perhaps it's in an area of your life that you've been working on for a long time: your temper, your weight, your judgmental tendencies. But I suspect that if you give yourself enough time and you're really honest with yourself, then you, too, could come up with a list of areas for improvement.

So let's imagine that you have this list in front of you. This list of all the areas of your life that you'd like to work on. It's staring at you dead-in-the-face and you want to make progress, but you have no clue whatsoever how to do it or where to begin. So...where do you begin, to change?

In the haftarah that we read this morning, we learn the story of Chanah. Chanah so desperately wants to have children. She makes a vow to God, claiming that

if God would grant her a child, she would dedicate the child to God all the days of his life. And then the haftarah continues as follows:

“And she kept on praying before God, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard.” (I Samuel 1:13). Only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard.

What’s going on here?

This verse alone has caused the rabbis in the Talmud to formulate different laws about prayer. The rabbis teach us that when it says “only her lips moved” this means that one who prays must enunciate with his/her lips. In other words, the rabbis advocate for a physical manifestation of our prayers. We must outwardly desire to change ourselves. It cannot be only internal.

How does Hannah cope with her desire for change? For starters, she focuses outwardly. By moving her lips, her prayer demonstrates that it’s not merely something that is internal. It’s outward. Now, you might ask, is it even possible to change from the outside in?

I recently listened to a podcast on NPR about this very topic. And I want to thank Shira Hochman for sharing this podcast with me. The podcast was about whether we can change from the outside in. You know, the old “fake it ‘til you make it” concept. Is there even merit to that? Well, apparently there is.

The podcast that I listened to described a man – Brett Cohen – who has always had a problem with celebrity stardom. He didn’t “get” how celebrities got the attention and he wasn’t a fan of it. But one day he decided to see what it was like to be a star himself. So he went onto craigslist – he hired someone to act as his bodyguard. He hired anyone with a camera to play the paparazzi. One of his friends acted as his right-hand man, who escorted him. And then one day, he decided to plop himself, with all of his entourage, right in the middle of Times Square. And instantly, he became a star. Haggles of women came running up to him. When the paparazzi asked people on the street what they thought of Brett Cohen – a no-name – they all said “oh my goodness, I love him. He’s amazing.” From the outside-in, Brett changed his opinion of stardom because, quite honestly, he admitted that he actually liked the attention. He changed from the outside in.

This same podcast also described an all-women’s debate team from Rwanda after the country legislated gender equality. It discussed how the women used

powerful pep-talks to encourage themselves to perform better during their debates – and in the end, because of their pep-talks and mantras that they would recite to themselves, they even won a debate where they had to argue AGAINST women’s equality.

Fake-it ‘til you make it. Strike a power pose. Can we really change from the outside in?

Well, I thought I would give it a try. (take off kittel, with Wonder Woman shirt on underneath).

You like my Wonder Woman shirt?

Do I feel a little more bold in this shirt? You betcha. Do I feel a little more powerful if, while wearing this shirt, I strike a power pose? And maybe flex my muscles? You bet. Does our wearing of nice clothing or make-up change how we might view ourselves? Yes! Does the way in which we talk to ourselves, either disparagingly or enthusiastically affect us? For sure.

So I want you all to stop moving for one second. I’ll ask you to take note of your body, as it is. Are your legs crossed, perhaps even your arms? Are you huddled over your prayer book? Is your head turned to one side, or is it lifted up?

Social psychologist Amy Cuddy shared on a recent Ted Talk how our body posture can influence our confidence and our level of success. She claims that, much like the animal kingdom, when our bodies are closed-off we become closed-off, too, less confident. But when we open up, when we have good posture, when we strike a power-pose, we become invincible.

What got me out of my work-out rut was the fact that, just by coincidence, I found myself looking sporty in work-out clothes. So somehow the outward manifestation of my sporty-ness was enough to motivate me to change, to take the step to just get on the treadmill. Without even knowing it, I changed from the outside-in.

When Hannah prayed, her lips moved. This was her way of changing from the outside-in, too.

But regarding Hannah, the Bible says that “her lips moved” but it also says that “her voice could not be heard.” From this the rabbis teach us that we should not pray

aloud, such that others can hear us during our silent meditations with God. And what can we learn from this?

We learn that prayer, for Hannah, was not about other people; it was about herself. Her outward manifestation of her prayer – with her lips moving – it was only about her. It's not like she was taking a selfie with the intent of showing it to other people or worrying about how it might be perceived by other people. Changes that we might make for ourselves outwardly are best implemented when they come from wanting to change a piece of us, not wanting to change how others might perceive us. Changes that we might make for ourselves outwardly are best implemented when they come from wanting to change a piece of us, not wanting to change how others might perceive us.

To wear my Wonder Woman shirt with the worry about how it might change your perception of me is futile. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we shouldn't care about how our actions or our goals affect other people. Indeed, we need to take these things into consideration. But I am saying that all we can do is change ourselves. And if we do change ourselves from the outside-in, it should be with the intent of wanting to change and improve me --- and not wanting to influence you.

So to wear my Wonder Woman shirt: it's about me and how it influences my ability to feel confident, to feel powerful, to feel like amazing changes in my life are possible.

Changing from the outside-in – it helps. But is it all that I need to do to change?

What about Hannah? She didn't *just* move her lips. The Bible says that she also “prayed in her heart.” She sought change from the outside-in. But she also sought change from the inside-out. What would it look like to change from within?

Rabbi Naomi Levy, a prominent rabbi and author in the Conservative Movement recently published a new book: *Einstein and the Rabbi*. In it, she explores the themes that are discussed in the written correspondence between Albert Einstein and a grieving rabbi. This correspondence inspires Rabbi Levy to explore questions about the soul and our interconnectedness with others on a deeply spiritual level. She coins the term “soulfie” and says a soulfie is our daily attempt to meet our souls. A soulfie is [quote] “our desire to cut through the surface distractions to get to know

our own true essence.” A soulfie is a way to “get to know your soul’s contours, its yearnings and longings, its knowledge and wisdom.” [end quote]

You see, a selfie captures one moment of time, but a soulfie captures the hopes and dreams and the yearning of our inner spirit across time. The selfie, when shared with others, represents what appears to be the best version of ourselves, but in actuality, may not. But the soulfie, when shared with others, could impact them at the core as our vulnerability speaks beautiful truths about our existence. A selfie is taken with the question “how do I look?” in mind. But the soulfie is taken with the question “how can I be?” in mind.

Rabbi Levy challenges us to ponder four questions to help groom our soulfie:

- (1) What has my soul been trying to say to me that I’ve been ignoring?
- (2) What activities and experiences nourish my soul that I don’t do enough of?
- (3) What does my soul want to repair that my ego is too stubborn or too fearful to repair?
- (4) What does my soul want me to reach for?

Only Hannah’s lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. I am Wonder Woman. I am sporty and will get on that treadmill. I can do this. Yes; there is something to be said about changing from the outside-in. When we see ourselves differently, when we present ourselves differently, when we engage in more positive self-talk, we can begin to change ourselves for the better.

But Hannah also prayed in her heart, she changed from within. May this Rosh Hashanah be a time to also change from the inside-out; let’s work on feeding and tending to our inner spirit, let’s work on nourishing the true soulfie within each of us. Shanah tovah.