

Rosh Hashanah Evening

2017/5778

Find the Good

Shanah Tovah.

We greet each other with these words tonight, sharing wishes for a good year. In this respect, our tradition is optimistic. 5778 brings a brand new blank slate for us. We say the words Shanah Tovah with hope that it will bring good things.

For some the past year brought joy and celebration. Sadly for many it also brought heartbreak and challenge. One can't ignore the reality that last month brought 4 major hurricanes, wildfires in three states and two major earthquakes.

The past year has not been all sunshine and roses--that's for sure.

The poet (Gregory Orr) writes that our task is "Not to make [hardship and loss] beautiful/But to make [them] the place/Where beauty starts." He reminds us that even pain and difficulty can be the location where blessings begin. No matter what 5777 has wrought for us, 5778 still brings abundant possibilities for goodness.

We are tasked with both finding the good and making the good in this new year.

The word for good in Hebrew is Tov. A short word in Hebrew with expansive implications. For starters, it is used 7 times in the creation story. After each day, God steps back and reviews God's work, reporting "Ki Tov".  
Light and dark-- ki tov!

Heavens and earth-- ki Tov!

The opposite of Tov is "rah" whose root word means unstable. Goodness in the context of creation means functional, predictable and viable for the future. Tov doesn't mean perfect, it means simply "getting the job done right." It is hard to imagine that God said "good enough" upon creating each day, but that is the moral here. Is that not our prayer for this new year? We hope and pray that our lives, our nation and the world will simply work functionally.

The third day of creation is a special day. In fact, in contemporary Israel, Tuesday (the third day) is still a particularly auspicious time of the week when many weddings take place. God declares "ki tov" twice after creating

both dry land and vegetation--it is a doubly good day. Commentators explain that Ki Tov is also a kind of exclamation of completion. God doesn't proclaim a day finished until it really is done. Perhaps the dry land without the plants and trees was too barren. It needed embellishment. Only after it is really complete does God exclaim the second "ki tov."

There is that moment when we can contribute to building something in our own way, that makes it better--for us or for the world. That is when we have our own second "ki tov" moment. It could be finishing a project at work, or completing a dissertation or article, . . . .or a sermon. A friend described her second ki tov moment as her pride upon the graduation of her son from college. . . after 6 years. As we enter this new year we too pray that we discover good in the sense that we find completion and satisfaction in our creations.

There is a timeless joke about a grandmother and her young grandson who are enjoying a day at the beach. It is a beautiful day without a cloud in the sky. The water is clear blue and as smooth as glass. All of a sudden a tidal wave appears and sweeps the boy out to sea. The grandmother immediately drops to her knees in the sand and prays. "Please God, I have always been a good person, a good Jew and a loving grandmother; please

return my grandson to me!” Just as she finishes her prayer, a huge wave crashes back on the beach, safely returning the little boy to his grandmother’s side. The grandmother begins to weep and hugs the grandson that she thought she would never see again. She is overcome with emotion. But then she pauses, looks once more at her grandson, looks back at the sky and yells, “Excuse me? I think he had a hat!!!” Sometimes we need to let go of the hat.

Our president, Rob Stolzman, quoting Voltaire, likes to remind me “not to make the perfect the enemy of the good.” Shakespeare also reminds us “Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.” Or as Confucius wrote, "Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without." Across the years and cultures many a wise person has described our human penchant not to accept good enough. That is what our ancient rabbis meant when they asked, “who is happy? Those who are content with their lot.” Our tradition reminds us to resist the pull of perfectionism. We must push back against our tendency to find fault and instead to be grateful with what we have--whatever that might be.

The value of gratitude in Hebrew is expressed in the phrase “hakarot hatov”--which literally means to “familiarize ourselves with goodness.” We

must get acquainted with the good in order to experience gratitude. We thank God for things as seemingly obvious as getting up in the morning and even going to the bathroom. The rabbis of the Talmud knew that approaching things with a positive attitude simply induces more joy. Kind of an ancient approach to the modern idea of gratitude journals. That means taking a glass half full approach. Our tradition doesn't sanction wallowing in negativity. Hear thunder? Instead of complaining about the bad weather recite "'Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, for your strength and your power fill the world.'" Irritated by that early morning alarm to start another day? Try offering the words "modah ani," how grateful I am to be awake and to stand before you." To find the good, we need to see the good already in our midst.

We live in a world we are now able to digitally log our dissatisfaction for almost any experience and broadcast it far and wide. Dumplings a little off? Write a bad review on Yelp. Hotel service not what it should have been? Tell it to Tripadvisor. Sometimes feedback can be constructive and other times just mean. Righteous indignation can be seductive. Judaism teaches us to pause and consider the positive first.

Over the last 14 years as your rabbi, I have consistently treasured the warm notes you write to me--I appreciate each and every one. I keep them from year to year in a file I call "yiheh tov"--it will all be good. That's what keeps me going when things get tough. I suspect you have felt that same joy at being recognized for your efforts with a kind word.

To find the good is to channel that impulse and to be the one to write the note.

When we recognize the good in ourselves we are more likely to be generous about finding the good inside others. Our tradition teaches that our worst moments need not define us. We can always transform for the better and at our core we are inherently worthy--and so are our neighbors, our family and those with whom we might disagree.

We lost a dear friend of our family this past year. Babette was my seattle grandmother. Finding the Good was the most important lesson I learned from her. Babette knew pain, suffering and health challenges. She was no stranger to loss or difficulty. But it never made her bitter, it never turned her inward or kept her from reaching out to others. I can't remember a time when she didn't greet me with a smile. She was kind, non-judgemental and

she could find the good in any person--and did. Seattle summers aren't generally known for their warmth. All that cloud cover means that tomatoes don't always ripen. So what does one do with green tomatoes? In the South they may fry them, but if you grew up on in my Jewish community there is one thing to do: Pickle them. One of my favorite memories is learning how to pickle in Babette's kitchen. When life hands us green tomatoes, a little garlic and dill can go a long way to transforming something undesirable into something delicious. Finding the good is about resilience. Marshalling our inner resources so that we can transform the unexpected into the serviceable. That is how we make the good.

This is a crucial lesson to teach our children as well. A colleague shared this poignant story that occurred last February during the wave of bomb threats that plagued Jewish communities around the nation--including our own. A Jewish day school received the threat during their morning prayer services.

So the students did what they had drilled to do such a circumstance.

Quietly and efficiently they evacuated to the parking lot.

But on the way, one kid grabbed the Torah scroll and took it outside.

Another kid grabbed a tallis and once outside, laid it across the hood of a car. And then the student with the scroll unrolled the Torah, on the tallis, on the hood of a car. Right there and then, the students continued with their Torah service. In the face of hatred and anti-semitism they prayed and chanted and through the beauty of our tradition brought the “tov” to that morning.

Whatever comes our way in this bright new year, may we recognize our blessings, not dwell upon our grievances and find satisfaction in our own creations. May we each take the time to share a kind word with someone else about a job well done. May we tap into our inner resources and channel the wisdom of our tradition. So that together we make 5778 Tov, good. . . or at least good enough. Shanah Tovah.



Musings and brainstorm:

As a tale so is life, not how long it is but how good it is that matters --seneca

Tov--the letters Tet and Vet.

The Tet looks upward and has the numerical value of 9--half of 18, chai, meaning life. The rabbis taught that it is intrinsically linked to good and to dream this letter is a good omen. A bet is open to the left in the direction we read Hebrew, teaches Rabbi Lawrence Kushner because "we [should] concern ourselves with the day the world was created and onward." So like a bet, we look ahead. We look upward and forward .

Judaism teaches us that we should recite up to 100 blessings a day in gratitude. The Shehechyanu offers gratitude for bringing us to a joyful moment in time in our own lives. But there is another the blessing said on good tidings which benefit the larger community. "HaTov VeHaMetiv" expresses thanksgiving for a broader goodness--one from which we may not personally derive as much advantage but which spreads the good across the board. (Tosafot Berakhot 43a.)

Hakarat hatov--Gratitude

<http://www.jewishpathways.com/mussar-program/gratitude>

<http://time.com/4731430/don-rickles-obituary-rabbi/>

<https://onbeing.org/blog/interdependence-and-the-good-society/>

we live and move and have our being  
here, in this curving and soaring world  
so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives  
and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together  
toward a common good,  
we can think to ourselves:  
ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.

It's two letter root, tet-bet, means "to prepare something to receive." It is also used in the context of kindling lights as the wick is readied to receive the light.

An obituary writer in Alaska, reflecting on her work sat down to summon advice for her children. After 20 years of summing up the lives of others she came up with this advice: Find the good.

Each morning our prayers include the words of Mah Tov: How good are your tents oh Jacob, your dwelling places oh Israel. One might think that these are words of enthusiasm came freely

flowing from a fan or friend of Israel. Wrong. It comes from a story in the book of Numbers where an evil king tasks a sorcerer with cursing the Israelites. Instead, upon gazing at their tents he is moved to utter the very words we say each time we enter the synagogue in the morning. It is a lesson to us on finding the good. There are times when we too feel like dwelling in the negative. This story is a reminder that sometimes the good is not readily apparent we can still find the strength to proclaim Mah Tov.

## Gratitude Stories

The founder of Chasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, tells the story of a diamond merchant and a thief. The merchant has an amazing diamond and the thief is obsessed by it. In fact, he tries to steal the diamond for years without any success. One night, they reach an isolated town with one inn. As chance would have it, the inn keeper only has one room left and they have to share. The two men bring their belongings to the room and then go downstairs to eat dinner. During the meal, the thief slips a potion into the merchant's drink which an hour later renders the merchant completely unconscious. The thief wastes no time looking for the diamond. He looks through all of the merchant's suitcases and pockets, and even in his shoes. High and low he looks . . . but nothing.

Just before sunrise the merchant shakes off the grogginess and stretches and sees the mess all around him and the thief snoring only a few feet away. The merchant quietly gets out of bed, reaches into the thief's own bag, where the night before he had hidden the precious diamond. After all, it was the only place he thought the thief would not look.<sup>4</sup>

Gratitude does not depend on acquiring something good. Instead, it is about recognizing what we already have, even if hidden in the most obvious of places.

There is an apocryphal story about Andrew Carnegie, the great early-20th century tycoon. His sister lamented to him that her two sons, who were away at college, rarely responded to her letters. Carnegie assured her that if he wrote them, he would get an immediate response. He sent off two warm letters to the boys, and told them that he was happy to send along for each of them a hundred dollar check. Of course, he cleverly did not enclose the checks. Within days he received warm, grateful letters from both boys, who noted at the letter's end that he had unfortunately forgotten to include the check. His letters had been read.

A grandmother and her young grandson are enjoying a day at the beach. There isn't a cloud in the sky. The water is blue and as smooth as glass. All of a sudden a tidal wave appears and sweeps the boy out to sea. The grandmother immediately drops to her knees in the sand and prays. "Please God, I have always been a good person, a good Jew and a loving grandmother; please return my grandson to me!" Just as she finishes her prayer, a huge wave crashes back on the beach, returning the little boy to his grandmother's side. The grandmother begins to cry and hugs the grandson that she thought she would never see again. She is overcome with emotion. But then she looks once more at her grandson, looks back at the sky and yells, "He had a hat!!!"[1]

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would create new religions

overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead, the stars come out every night and we watch television.[3]Paul Hawken in a Commencement Address at the University of Portland, 2009:

<http://www.up.edu/commencement/default.aspx?cid=9456>

- Voltaire: "The best is the enemy of the good."
- Confucius: "Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without."
- Shakespeare: "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well."

Our tradition also understands that finding the good is not always so simple. King Solomon, a leader known for his wisdom and vision knew that as well. When accepting his role as sovereign he offers this prayer: "Grant then your servant a listening heart to discern between good and evil." (I Kings 3:9) The path to good is not easy. We must make difficult decisions. We must choose what is right, ethical and kind. We must take a stand against hatred and wrongdoing. It is our choices that will make this year a good year. Our prayer is King Solomon's prayer. May we find a listening heart, a discerning spirit that enables us to see the good and bring it into our world.

Rabbi Israel of Rizhin once asked a student how many sections there were in the Shulchan Arukh--the code of Jewish law. The student, shocked that his teacher would ask such a rudimentary question, replied, "But of course there are Four."

"What do you know about the fifth section?" asked the rabbi.

"But there is no fifth section," said the student aghast.

"There is," said the rabbi.

"It says: always treat a person like a mensch."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks adds, "The fifth section of the code of law is the conduct that cannot be reduced to law. That is what it takes to do the right and the good."

As we enter this new year, we summon words from that unwritten tractate to do good, make good a build good.

An essential part of finding the good is in giving thanks for these blessings. Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. Environmental activist Paul Hawkins answered “No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would create new religions overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead, the stars come out every night and we watch television.” Consider this summer’s eclipse: never have we paid so much attention to the sun and the moon. To find good in the new year means to refamiliarize ourselves with our bounty.