

Stepping Up
Rosh Hashanah 5777
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

My cousin Rav Yoel Rackovsky has been teaching overseas students, first at Yeshivat HaKotel and now at Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh, for several decades. Rav Yoel is a fascinating individual. A calligrapher and scribe whose illuminated Megillot are collectors items, an advanced practitioner of martial arts, a committed adherent of a macrobiotic diet and a deeply spiritual person. His home in the Old City of Jerusalem is *the* address for his many hundreds of devoted disciples to pour out their souls to a genuinely listening ear. In a scenario that must have happened dozens of times, one of Rav Yoel's students was dating for marriage purposes and was having a difficult time with it. He had gone on dozens of first dates, few of which turned into second dates and none of which became successful relationships. He was feeling despondent, and turned to Rav Yoel for advice and commiseration. Rav Yoel told him something that took him completely by surprise. "I want you to go out and buy a nice white shirt for your wedding." His student was a little surprised. 'Rebbe, I just told you that there is no one in the picture!" Rav Yoel said, "I'm telling you. Go out and buy a fancy shirt for your wedding. Make sure it has french cuffs!" Several months later, Rav Yoel danced together with this young man at his wedding. The atmosphere was joyous, and the light glinted off of the cufflinks the groom was wearing on the shirt he had purchased.

Picture the scene. It's Rosh Hashanah, and the Jewish people are gathered in Yerushalaim. It is about 2500 years ago, shortly after the return from exile. The Jewish nation was beset by

ignorance and astronomical rates of intermarriage, even among the Kohanim. Generations of Jews had no idea who their ancestors were, and there was rampant opposition, even among other Jews, to the resettlement of the land of Israel. As the expression goes, *plus ce change, plus ce meme chose*- the more things change, the more they stay the same. They were thirsty to hear the word of God again, and asked Ezra the Scribe to bring out the scroll of the Torah. Ezra ascended to the podium and surrounded himself with a group of scholars who could explain the words being read to those who didn't understand them. The Jewish people stood outside for hours while the Torah scroll was read, and as they listened, they began to bawl. They had fallen so far short of what the Torah wanted that they felt there was no hope left for them. And then Nechemia told them, "Don't worry. Go home, eat delicious foods, drink sweet beverages...because today is a holy day to God and God's rejoicing is your strength."

ח וַיִּקְרְאוּ בַסֵּפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים, מִפְּרֹשׁ; וְשׁוּם שָׂכָל, וַיְבִינוּ בַמִּקְרָא. {ס}

ט וַיֹּאמֶר נְחֻמְיָה הוּא הַתְּרַשְׁתָּא וְעִזָּרָא הַכֹּהֵן הַסֹּפֵר וְהַלְוִיִּם הַמְּבִינִים אֶת-הָעָם לְכָל-הָעָם, הַיּוֹם קָדוֹשׁ-הוּא לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם--אֶל-תִּתְאַבְּלוּ, וְאֶל-תִּבְכּוּ: כִּי בּוֹכִים כָּל-הָעָם, כִּשְׁמַעֲם אֶת-דְּבַרֵי הַתּוֹרָה.

י וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לִכּוּ אֲכָלוּ מִשְׂמְנִים וּשְׂתוּ מִמַּתְקִים, וּשְׁלַחוּ מְנוֹת לְאִין נֶכּוֹן לוֹ--כִּי-קָדוֹשׁ הַיּוֹם, לְאֲדַנְיָנוּ; וְאֶל-תִּעְצְבוּ,

כִּי-חֲדוֹת יְהוָה הִיא מְעֻזְכֶם

The Yerushalmi in Maseches Rosh Hashanah elaborates on this further. "What a great nation is the Jewish people. For other nations, a person who is involved in a court case must dress in black to reflect the solemnity of the occasion. But the Jewish people, when they face a divine verdict, dress in white clothes, wash and cut their hair, eat and drink- because they are certain they will emerge victorious." And lest you think this is merely a verse in Tanach and a statement of

Chazal, know that this is the *Halacha* (Orach Chaim 597:1) we are enjoined to wear nice clothes and eat a lavish meal on Rosh Hashanah, precisely for this reason.

אוֹכְלִים וְשׁוֹתִים וְשִׂמְחִים, וְאֵין מִתְעַנֵּין בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה וְלֹא בְּשֶׁבֶת שׁוֹבָה; אֲמַנָּם לֹא יֹאכְלוּ כָּל שְׁבָעִים, לְמַעַן לֹא יִקְלוּ רֵאשִׁים וְתִהְיֶה יִרְאַת ה' עַל פְּנֵיהֶם.

It seems that Nechemiah had poor pastoral skills. The Jewish people were *terrified!* Telling them to eat something wasn't going to solve their problems- or ours. Look around you in this room: Everyone in this room wants or needs something in the coming year: it may be a person with a tenuous job situation or struggling to meet mortgage payments, another person handed a devastating diagnosis, someone who wants to get married or is having trouble in their marriage, someone who wants children or is not getting *nachas* from a child they already have. Look around the world: the tentacles of terror spread ever wider, anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment, which are often the same thing, are once again rampant in the halls of power and academia, Israel still faces mortal existential threats and American society is perilously and angrily divided along racial, economic and political lines. As a community, as a country and as a people, there is a great deal riding on what happens today. How can we treat this so cavalierly?

I'd like to suggest that Nechemiah's instructions lie at the heart of what Rosh Hashanah is all about. In telling the Jewish people to sit down and eat a meal, he wasn't dismissing their concerns; he was issuing a challenge. Do you want a positive verdict? Do you want a successful Rosh Hashanah? If you do, you have to do something to show you are ready to make it happen. This is certainly true in our relationship with Jewish communal and religious life. It is easy to tell ourselves that simply proposing an idea for others to execute is sufficient for our communal

involvement, even if we don't invest sweat equity in it. It is also easy to sit back and wait for communal institutions and initiatives to serve us: whether it is childcare or kiddush set up, chevra kadisha or chessed minyan- we often think these things don't require our effort, just our decision of whether to opt in, but that is not the case. Today, we are feeling a deep void in our shul. There is a seat in the last row that is no longer occupied by a person whose reassuring presence was a constant in our lives, whose smile was first thing two generations of Shaare members encountered when they arrived at shul. Mr. Becker left us a week before Rosh Hashanah, but his spirit is very much alive in his favorite place- in shul. Mr. Becker never waited for anyone to wait upon him; he was always at shul performing various tasks like counting the money from the tzedaka boxes, serving as Gabbai Sheni and doing anything else that needed to be done. He embodied this lesson, he understood what Jewish communal life was about- and our sadness at his passing obligates us to live up to this lesson.

In our religious lives, too, this is essential. There are certain *mitzvot* that we can perform through an agent. That is how, for example, there is such a thing as a *mohel*. It is a father's obligation to circumcise his own child, which we see in the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah when Avraham circumcises Yitzchak. However, many fathers are untrained, nervous or squeamish. To avoid any complications, the father appoints the *mohel* as his agent to perform the bris on his behalf. But there are other *mitzvot* that cannot be done through an agent. These are called *chovat haguf*, a personal obligation. Only we can put on Tefillin for ourselves, only we can honor our parents, only we can go to the Mikvah and only we can keep Shabbos for ourselves. The reason for this is that we have to take ownership over our observance and our

spiritual growth; the degree to which we are willing to invest in our religious growth by stepping up and showing our love of Judaism and is the degree to which we and our families will grow- especially our families. In the first year I taught in High School, an irate parent once yelled at me for giving her child a low grade in a Judaic Studies class. We were actually in agreement- we both felt that her son didn't receive the grade he deserved, but I thought I was being generous. In a fit of pique, she said "Your job, Rabbi, is to make my son love Judaism, not to stress him out with bad grades." While I question love of Judaism that is so flimsy it can't withstand a poor report card grade, she was certainly correct that was my job to foster her son's love of Judaism- but it is only possible if it is done in a partnership. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, was certainly a busy man, but he would travel to the Netiv Meir Yeshiva in Yerushalaim each week, at least once a week, to learn with his sons who were boarding there. His daughters lived at home, and he learned with them as frequently and on the exact same level as he did his sons. When someone remarked that it was amazing that he was doing this, he reacted with incredulity. "If I don't learn with them, who will?" We might expect that, for all our tuition dollars, our children should be fully committed and engaged Jews solely as a result of their education, but that simply isn't the case; if we don't learn with them, who will? To be sure, it is a great blessing that we have many talented and dedicated teachers in our community to learn with our kids. It is also true that sometimes, children exceed their parents' level of knowledge. But that means we should learn with our children so *they* can teach *us*. The only way the values our children are taught in school and at home will last is if we reinforce them at home with our own involvement and modeling, and not delegate their education to others.

It certainly is true in our relationships. We live in a society in which you can get virtually anything done for you by someone else, often without leaving your desk or couch. The technology available for fulfilling our every need becomes increasingly sophisticated, in the service of wants that are of lesser and lesser importance. Three weeks ago, Google announced that it would be sending drones to fulfill a burning need of students at Virginia Tech University—burritos. Can you imagine that? Drones used to be deployed to spy on enemies; now they fuel all-nighters. As early as 2005, the columnist AJ Jacobs wrote a piece in Esquire Magazine called “Outsourcing Life,” in which he hired a “remote personal assistant,” whose services he took to great lengths:

I decide to test the next logical relationship: my marriage. These arguments with my wife are killing me—partly because Julie is a much better debater than I am. Maybe Asha can do better:

Hello Asha,

My wife got annoyed at me because I forgot to get cash at the automatic bank machine...

I wonder if you could tell her that I love her, but gently remind her that she too forgets things—she has lost her wallet twice in the last month. And she forgot to buy nail clippers for Jasper.

AJ

I can't tell you what a thrill I got from sending that note. It's pretty hard to get much more passive-aggressive than bickering with your wife via an e-mail from a subcontinent halfway around the world

It is to be hoped that we don't outsource our closest relationships, but that is exactly the point. No relationship is successful if we don't step up and make it so. So often, we rely on other people and devices to keep our children entertained or occupied, so we end up spending as little time with them as possible. On Shabbos, our children play at other people's houses, and during the week they are occupied with school, sports and screens. We know when we are "phoning it in" as parents, when we are distracted and absent for our children or relying on distracting them so we don't have to parent them, and we know when we are putting in less than 100 percent in being attentive spouses or friends. But we also know that no one else can and should be showing that kind of love and attention instead of us.

Finally, in this uncertain world, stepping up is critical if we are to effect any kind of change in the challenges facing our community, our nation and our homeland. Our consumer economy is one of the primary reasons, for example, that there is a tuition crisis in our community- because Jewish education has come to be viewed as a consumer good, rather than a sacred communal responsibility, so we wait for our schools to cater to increasingly unrealistic expectations which drive up costs for all the consumers- i.e. parents- involved. Then, when the problem spirals out of control, we wait for others to find the solution as well. I am no different, as I don't have an answer, and this is only one of the challenges we face. On Rosh Hashanah, as we contemplate the spiritual and political agendas of our contemporary Orthodox community and the political interests of the United States and Israel, it is critical that we realize that these solutions will not be formulated by people who sit behind computers screens writing furious facebook posts or

petitions, or by people who like to talk politics over cholent on Shabbos morning. Instead, it must be formulated by the people who are willing to be involved in the day to day nuanced realia of contemporary Jewish life and are willing to invest themselves in political solutions to national issues without being satisfied simply by casting a vote.

I think this is all what my cousin, he of the shirt miracle, was trying to tell his young student. I like to think I'm a rational person, and I know my cousin; he is no *baal moyfes*, no miracle worker, and he would be the first to tell you so. Besides, it is impossible to prove causality in this world; the young could just as easily have met his intended without having purchased a shirt. So what was the point in telling him to buy one? He was telling him that no one can get married for you; being set up by other people is fine, but personal initiative is the key to reaping reward. Maybe, by buying the shirt, he was able to gain a sense of confidence and ownership in his situation. In a short while, we will recite the Unetaneh Tokef for the first time. We recite the litany of possible outcomes that are decided on this day, but often forget the most important part: כן תעביר ותספור ותפקוד נפש כל חי - you will watch over, count and decide on the soul of each living creature. Each of us is unique and each of us has a contribution to make that no one else can- and each one of us will be judged for how well we have stepped up and contributed . Let us rise to the occasion and show initiative, and may we be granted a year of only success, happiness and blessing.