

Don't Aim for Perfect; Aim for Better
Leyl Rosh HaShanah 5780
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Shanah Tovah!

In high school, this time of year made me anxious to have my name written in *two* books, as it were. "As it were," since one was a book, but not exactly real. While the second was very real but not exactly a book. The first "book" was *Sefer HaHayim*, the Book of Life, the book in which Jews worldwide seek to be written and sealed for a good year. This is our sacred task in shul tonight and over the High Holidays.

While the second "book" was a prize awarded for Ohio Top Sports Column in a High School Newspaper. I was really involved in my school paper and regularly wrote my own sports column called, Column as we see 'em.

After several of my columns had printed, my newspaper advisor encouraged me to enter this one journalism contest. The big day of the prompt arrived, and I was feeling...excited. Excited to write the perfect sports column. As soon as the clock started I began to think...and think... and think...and not write a word for a full 30 minutes. It was utter agony. It was the most severe bout of writer's block I'd ever experienced, then and now. My paper was as blank as my mind.

Extremely frustrated, I got up to get some water and take a quick walk. My advisor eyed me, knowing something was wrong. I told her, "I don't know why I can't do this. I want to write the perfect piece but it's not happening. I'm stuck."

She answered, "It's not happening because it can't. There's no 'perfect' column. It can't be done."

"OK, so what do I do?"

"How do you feel about your last column?"

"I feel it was good."

"Can you do better than that? Even just a little?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Aim to do that," she said. "Don't aim for perfect. Aim for better."

I went back to my paper, thought for a minute, and put a sentence down. Then the rest of the essay just flowed, like pouring Rosh HaShanah honey from a jar.

My newspaper teacher's advice was geared for writers. But it's really on point for all of us. Don't aim for perfect. Aim for better.

The High Holiday season is the time for Teshuva. The word is usually translated as “Repentance” but it means so much more in Hebrew: “Return, Renewal, Personal transformation.”

We spend these days in shul considering our past and our futures. We atone for past sins and commit to improving in the year ahead. We are encouraged to make resolutions, similar to what many Americans do around January 1st. Here is where this advice is best placed.

I myself make such a resolution every High Holiday season. When I was first motivated to do this years ago, this was my thought process: identify X as where I fell short; aim to be *perfect* at X. But after significant focus and effort, I eventually fell short once, twice, and then again. Having fallen short and failed, in my eyes, I reverted to my old habits. I gave up. Try, fail, repeat.

But there’s an alternative: identify X as where I fell short; aim to be *better* at X. Try, succeed, repeat.

Here are two practical examples, one *Hol*, the other *Kodesh*, the first secular, the second religious. The first one is perhaps the most common refrain around January 1st: going to the gym. (Don’t read into this too much! I’m not judging anybody!) If someone who doesn’t go to the gym wants to start going, where should they set the bar? It’s tempting to set it high, like going three times a week. But how long will that last? If one makes it once or even twice a week, they might feel like a failure because they’re falling short. Then they may stop going altogether. Aiming for *perfect* is perfectly all or nothing.

However, if one aims for *better*, they just might do better. If they try to go once a week, that’s more achievable. With the momentum of success, they’re more likely to keep at it and add when they’re ready. Aiming for better is slow and steady. And you don’t need to be a sports columnist to know how that race will end.

Now let’s look at a Jewish resolution one might make around now. I’ll use the example of keeping more Kosher, but this could work for so many things. Someone who is an omnivore who attempts to make a full break and eat only hekshered products - certified Kosher products - is taking on an awful lot. Too much too soon, I think.

With Judaism, it’s rarely all or nothing. It’s usually, the more the better.

Rabbi Morris Allen, a Conservative rabbi in Minneapolis, created a Kashrut ladder, called “Chew by Choice.” Here are the nine rungs of his ladder:

The omnivore who wants to keep some Kosher should aim for better

First by not eating pork.

Next, not eating shellfish.

Then, not mixing meat and dairy foods.

Next, waiting three hours between meat and dairy.

Then, using separate dishes for meat and dairy.

Followed by Kosher meat or vegetarian food at home.

Then, not eating meat at non-Kosher restaurants.

Next, only hekshered products in the home.
Finally, only hekshered products outside the home.

I love that this model presents keeping Kosher as a ladder. It's a series of practical steps that seek to be *better*.

One might be tempted to look at keeping Kosher as this massive, intimidating all-or-nothing enterprise. But it's not. It's a series of steps, and it's doable. As the Torah says in Deuteronomy, "*Lo BaShamayim He*, It's not in the heavens" (Dt. 30:12). It's not impossible.

This model of a ladder is also deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition. In one of the most unforgettable scenes in all of literature, Jacob falls asleep outside with a rock as a pillow. He has an otherworldly dream: "Indeed, there was a ladder set on the ground with its top reaching the heavens. Indeed, angels of G-d were going up and down it."

Later Jacob awakens and realizes, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of G-d, and that is the gateway to heaven" (Gn. 28:17).

Look at this ladder as a metaphor. That is, understand that it is a ladder that leads us to G-d. Spiritual growth is a step-by-step process.

The Etz Hayim Humash gets it exactly right. It comments, "We ascend toward G-d one step at a time, making one small change in our lives and stabilizing it before we take another step. Sometimes we slip and miss a step, falling back, but we recover and keep climbing. Most people do not leap toward G-d in one great burst of enthusiasm."

What was true for Jacob - the Patriarch Israel - is true for his progeny - the People Israel. The ladder is the link between earth and heaven; between ordinary people and our extraordinary dreams. It's about taking one more step higher. It's about aiming to be just a little better.

In high school, I sat in that cold chair after school one day feeling frozen in crunch time. Frozen, I now know, because I was seeking something that didn't exist. Don't aim for perfect, my advisor coached, aim for better. Liberated, I began to write.

Today, we here in these shul seats after-hours may similarly feel that this is crunch time. We're not wrong. These are the days when G-d judges our actions and our fates with proverbial pen in hand, hopefully in the Book of Life. But we too have a pen in our hand. We too get to write - in our case the script of how we live our own days ahead.

Take a deep breath. Aim for better. And let's begin to write.

Shanah Tovah.