

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein

“Good as Hell”

Rosh Hashanah 5780

As I began the process of preparing for the New Year, I sought inspiration from the wisest sage I could find. Who will inspire us? Is it a rabbinic scholar? Is it a contemporary thought leader? And then it came to me. Turns out, its 100%...Lizzo. This contemporary musical genius distilled our work during Rosh Hashanah perfectly in her lyrics, “Woo girl, need to kick off your shoes, got to take a deep breath, time to focus on you.”¹ That’s it...that’s the whole thing.

Today, we’re here for a personal and a communal reset. To take a deep breath, turn inward and set our priorities for the new year. The Hasidic text, Sfat Emet teaches, “The human heart is the tablet on which God writes. Each of us has the word ‘life’ engraved on our hearts by God’s own hand. Over the course of the year, that engraving comes to be covered with grit.”² And it's been a gritty year. A chaotic time in our country- a chaotic time to be alive. When we’re not careful, our lives become consumed by empty patterns- blindly moving from one thing to the next, work and email, school and homework, twitter and facebook, sleep and repeat-- as the grit builds up on our hearts.

Earlier in our service, Cantor Robins chanted Unetaneh Tokef, a haunting reminder that none of us knows what the new year holds and that life is sacred. That we can’t spend our precious time going through the motions, because if we do that, the grit overtakes us. On Rosh Hashanah the call of the shofar wakes us up, and reminds us to wipe away the grit and to break the cycle.

But how do we do that? How do reset our patterns- and set the priorities that nourish our souls, that give our lives meaning?

I believe the answer is written on the teal shirts that our religious school teachers have worn on opening day, announcing the three core values that guide our religion school learning. **Belonging, Significance and Fun.** These priorities are inspired by a secular classroom curriculum called “Responsive Classroom,” that centers social-emotional learning. They are designed to help educators nurture a generation of students with “grit, resilience, and courageous spirits.”³ Reflecting on 5779, I think that these three principles could be pretty useful for grown ups, too.

Belonging, Significance and Fun -- can help all of us set priorities for our time and attention in 5780.

Let’s begin with belonging. Belonging is a very Jewish notion. Our faith is all about ritual- from the apples and honey to the shofar to the bagels at break-fast- it feels good and comfortable when you recognize the predictable patterns that are present when you’re practicing Judaism. And, you can’t be Jewish alone. In some of our most significant moments, Jews need a

¹ “Good as Hell,” Lizzo.

² With Gratitude to Rabbi Danya Ruttenger. *Days of Awe*, S.Y. Agnon.

³ Lora Hodges, Developer of the Responsive Classroom Approach.

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minyan, 10 people. When you are marking the joy and promise of a wedding, you need at least a *minyan* to chant the celebratory seven blessings. And hopefully, they stick around to eat and dance and celebrate. You need a *minyan* to say the Mourner's Kaddish, the words we recite when we remember a loved one who has died. We recite these words during shiva, when we invite all of our friends and neighbors to surround and embrace us. At the highest emotional peaks and the lowest valleys the familiar rituals and the presence of community is meant to embrace you with a sense of belonging.

This is not only true of religious life. Every fancy exercise class follows a carefully choreographed series of rituals, and political campaign rallies have started encouraging participants to introduce themselves to the people standing next to them. At a recent Moms Demand Action conference in DC, in addition to lobbying and protesting, these gun violence prevention activists participated in a hugging circle. Each of us needs community. To feel like we have found our people. To have a place, as we say in Boston, “Where everybody knows your name.”

In the story of creation, we read that after God created Adam, God quickly realized that this wasn't exactly right. God said, “Its not good for man to be alone,”⁴ and God created Eve to keep Adam company. From the very beginning, we have understood that humans need company. Families by birth, and families by creation. Teams and tribes and squads that we know have our back, when we're celebrating and when we're sad. As we begin 5780, ask yourself- where do I feel a sense of belonging? How can I spend my time building a community where I feel supported, loved and cared for?

Let's turn to the second principle- significance. As we set our intentions for the new year, we need more than belonging...finding community and love. We also need to pursue a sense of significance. Investing our time and attention on what matters to us and to our world.

I have a sign that sits on my desk that says, “How are you spending your time?” I made it after a community organizing training when the trainer explained that we will always be too busy for organizing. There is always one more email, another phone call- something that feels more pressing. But if we want to change our communities, if we want to change the world, we have to be deliberate about how we're spending our time, and we have to spend our time on things that matter.

In August of 2018, activist Greta Thunberg started a school strike in Sweden. As she learned more about the climate crisis- she said, “I promised myself I was going to do everything I could do to make a difference.”⁵ She spent that first day alone- holding a sign that read, “School strike for climate.” She returned the next day, she had a bit of company. For the next 21 days she spent *her* time outside the Swedish Parliament. The protest grew and grew and word spread. Her

⁴ Genesis 2:18

⁵ <https://time.com/collection-post/5584902/greta-thunberg-next-generation-leaders/>

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solitary strike grew into a movement. Since then, she has inspired leaders- teens and adults- to spend *their* time organizing strikes and actions. On September 20th, two million people walked out of work and school around the globe to sound the alarm on climate change.

On Rosh Hashanah, we re-acquaint ourselves with a sense of purpose- with the belief that our world can be better than it is right now. “*Hayom Harat Olam.*” We say these words during the shofar service. The English translation often says, “Today is the birthday of the world.” But that’s not exactly what they mean, as if Rosh Hashanah is an occasion for party hats, piñatas and a Carvel ice cream cake. *Hayom harat olam* really means that today the world is being formed. That today the world is being created anew. That, today, the world is ripe for renewal and change.

We are the people who can bring that change about, the co-creators that can bring our world closer to what we believe it can be. But to do that, we have to give it our time and attention- to spend our time on work that is significant. As you set your intentions for the new year, I ask: what feels urgent to you? What feel significant? How are you spending your time? Are you playing a part in creating a better world?

Finally, as we prepare for the new year- Yes, we need to feel a sense of belonging. Yes, we need to feel significance. But let’s not forget about fun. Now, if you ask most people to describe attributes of Jews- I’m not sure they’d start with “fun.” Its true, Jewish history is marred by suffering and tragedy. We have museums and memorials that pay tribute to thousands of years of persecution. Yes, sadness and suffering are certainly a part of the Jewish story- but in spite of this, maybe even *because* of this, we are a hopeful people, we are an optimistic people, we are a people who are serious about fun.

I would guess that nearly everyone in this room has experienced the joy of Jewish celebration- dancing like crazy during the horah at weddings or B’nai Mitzvah. In a few weeks, we celebrate Sukkot, called *Zman Simchateinu*, time of our joy. The week of celebration culminates with Simchat Torah, an epic dance party in the sanctuary, Torahs in hand. And, you don’t have to wait for special occasions. Every Friday night at sundown- we say kiddush and we drink some wine in order to sweeten the celebration. We rejoice in the act of simply gathering around the table, sharing food and unhurried conversation with friends and loved ones.

In spite of the dark periods and the suffering, Jews have always ritualized joy and fun. We know that you have to try to find the light, even when there’s darkness. Not because we are naive or ignorant, but because being human is living into the full range of our emotions. In Judaism, we begin counting our days at sunset so that we’re always looking forward to the first light, affirming as the psalmist says, that “joy comes in the morning.”⁶ Jewish tradition understood, even before Smartphones, and soccer, tutors and trials- we understood that we have

⁶ Psalm 30:6

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to be deliberate about joy. We have to ritualize and sanctify joy- to set the time aside, and protect it. So, in 5780, make sure you have fun -- Rabbi's orders!

As we set our intentions for the New Year, I want to propose the “5780 priorities test”- Before you commit to something new, to something extra, ask yourself: “Does this give me a sense of belonging? Am I spending my time on something significant? Is it going to be fun?” If the answer to all three questions is “no,” then maybe it's not worth your precious time.

Today, let us commit to creating the circumstances in our lives for meaning, and nourishment and joy. To spend our time in places of belonging- where we are loved and valued for who we are. To spend our energy on matters of significance, believing that we can change the world and showing up to make it happen. And seeking out fun- doing the things that we love with the people who we love.

May the sound of the shofar wake us up- help us take a deep breath and wipe the slate clean- as we celebrate what is possible as we begin again, at the dawn of 5780.