

Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman
Rosh Hashanah Evening
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The Purpose of Beginnings and the Beginnings of Purpose

A few years ago, there was a terrific newspaper cartoon, showing two men, each carrying a large sign, about to physically run into each other at a street corner. One man's sign was urging everyone to, "Repent! This could be your last day!" The other man's sign was reminding everyone to, "Rejoice! Today is the first day of the rest of your life!" It was entitled "The Philosophical Showdown."¹

What makes this such a wonderful incongruity is not just that each man's sign is always true – it's that every so often, we need to be reminded of both truths. We just read in our *machzor* of "Rabbi Eliezer [teaching], 'Repent one day before your death.' His disciples asked, 'How can one know what day that will be?' [Rabbi Eliezer] responded: 'Precisely! Repent today...in case you should die tomorrow. Thus will you spend all your days wisely.'² When we remember that "this could be our last day," we start thinking about the big questions of life – "When I am gone, what kind of person do I want to have been?" And yet when we remember that "today is the first day of the rest of our lives," we start thinking about the more practical questions of life – "What can I do today that will lead me towards the person I want to become?" Rosh Hashanah is our day to delve into the implications of both sides of this "philosophical showdown," and examine both the beginnings of purpose and the purpose of beginnings.

¹ http://dipika.blogspot.com/2004_07_01_archive.html

² *Gates of Repentance*, 68

Rosh Hashanah is different from the secular new year, the time when we set goals for our personal success. We most naturally think of goals as *ends*, aiming to lose those 10 pounds, get into that college or get that promotion. But in fact, most research shows that after the euphoria of taking in that waistline, reading that acceptance letter or hitting that paybump, our level of happiness tends to go right back to where it started. Why? Because fulfillment and joy are found not in what we *hope to have*, but in who we *strive to become*.

Rosh Hashanah is our day to explore not just our goals for 5768, but the *purpose* for our lives. We think not about physical or academic or monetary goals, but instead, ask ourselves the larger question, “What kind of person do I truly want to be?” And striving for *that goal does* provide us a sense of fulfillment of happiness. A recent study showed people feel most satisfied when they “...focus on a pursuit of goals that involve growth, connection, and contribution...and [on goals that] are personally important...”³ Ultimately, *we* are the only ones who can determine the changes we want to make in our own lives. For some of us, that may mean being more emotionally present for our loved ones. For others, it might mean becoming more active in social justice causes. For still others, it might mean being more patient, or more assertive, or more self-aware. What is crucial to remember, though, is that these goals of personal improvement are not *ends*. While we can envision achieving the goal of losing 10 pounds, or getting promoted, now matter how much we try, we will never be able to say, “And now, I am the perfect parent.” Instead, these goals are *means*. They can inspire us, guide us and strengthen us when we feel discouraged, lost, and weak. In the words of Israeli psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, “[our task is to] enjoy the *journey* on our way toward a *destination* we deem valuable. [Life] is not about making it to the peak of

³ Kennon Sheldon, quoted in Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier*, 71

the mountain, [and] nor is it about climbing aimlessly around the mountain; *[it] is the experience of climbing toward the peak.*”⁴

But therein lies the rub. Even if we take this Rosh Hashanah to look deep within ourselves and determine exactly what kind of person we want to be, when the moment comes for us to actually do the hard work that’s necessary, amnesia frequently manages to kick in. Professor Daniel Gilbert phrases it this way:

[When our sister asks if we can] babysit the nephews and nieces next month]...we look forward to the obligation even as we jot it in our diary. [After all, we decided this year that we wanted to “be there for our family. But t]hen, when it actually comes time to buy the Happy Meal [lunches], set up the Barbie playset, and [try to] ignore the fact that the NBA playoffs are on, we wonder what in the world we were thinking when we said yes. Well, here’s what we were thinking: [we tend to see] baby-sitting next month [as] an “act of love”...[but] baby-sitting right now [as] an “act of lunch.”⁵

When we look towards the far-off horizon of our future, we visualize the wonderful human being we hope to become this year. But as we near the horizon, and start to see the day-to-day reality, we forget that in fact, “acts of love” consist almost exclusively of “acts of lunch.” It is often hard enough to simply *imagine* what kind of person we want to become; it is even harder to take the steps to do it.

And that is when we need to recall that each day is the first day of the rest of our lives. When we come to appreciate the journey as much as the destination, we understand that each and every day we have an opportunity to begin anew. We have an opportunity to realize that while the mistakes we made have caused us to stray from our path, we can always get back onto the course we want to set. Author Stephen Covey shares a story about Harry,

⁴ Ben-Shahar, 27, italics his

⁵ adapted from Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, 106

a seventy-six-year old man who went to a support group. When asked why he was there, he told everyone that “[m]y wife told me this is my last chance. If I don’t straighten up, I’m out on my rear. You see, I’ve been a rascal all my life. Do you think it’s too late for me?” Covey answered, “It’s only too late if you don’t start now.” So Harry started taking the essential steps towards the goal of becoming a better husband. He started helping his wife more, doing the dishes, taking out the trash, repairing the roof. At first, he kept getting disappointed that his wife didn’t automatically say, “How wonderful that you’ve changed!” But Covey reminded him, “Your wife has had 52 years of marriage with you acting a certain way. A change in relationship will take time, and so think of the goal of becoming of a better husband as a *means* rather than an *end*. Remember – who you want to become will be defined by how you act.” So, once a week, for the next eleven weeks, he would check in with his group, sharing his progress and his challenges along the way. And at the last session, he went up to Covey, and gave him a great big hug. Covey was touched, but didn’t understand, so Harry explained: “That hug is from my wife. She wanted me to tell everyone I could stay!”⁶

Without a doubt, as Harry struggled to repair his relationship with his wife, there would be setbacks, probably quite a few that would cause him to doubt whether his actions were having any effect at all. But he also understood that each day was his opportunity to move towards his goal of becoming a better person. While he would never be *perfect*, he would be *better*. And that is always our purpose on these High Holy Days – not to reach the mountaintop, but simply to move in the right direction. As Rabbi Kerry Olitzsky teaches,

The new year means that we have passed over the hurdles of the past year. We give ourselves a clean break. The new year means that we have the potential to transcend some of the

⁶ adapted from Stephen Covey, *Living the Seven Habits*, 10

mistakes we have made in the past even though we may be still working to repair them.⁷

Teshuvah – repentance – truly means “a returning.” It is a recognition that we have gone off course in our lives. And so when we gaze up towards the mountain top of our ideal selves, *teshuvah* is our return to the path leading us there.

Indeed, as we try to pilot our own lives amidst the chaos of the world, it may help to remember this fact: When a pilot flies from one city to the next, in actuality, the plane is off course almost 90% of the time. And so if that’s the case, then how does it happen that nearly every single plane arrives at its destination safe and sound? It’s almost always off course! It’s because the pilot knows where the plane started, where he wants the plane to go, and has a plan to get from point A to point B. And as the plane goes on its journey, the pilot always compares where the plane *is* relative to where he *wants it to be* and then uses feedback from the surrounding environment to get it back on course.⁸

For us as well, we are often off course in our lives – maybe even up to 90% of the time. We overreact, we say an unkind word, we fail to come through for our friends or family, we micromanage, we get angry, we get impatient. But ultimately, if we know both where we actually *are* and where we *want to be going*, and then do what we can get back on course, we can return. We can make *teshuvah*, a return to the person we want ourselves to be.

Each day is an opportunity to see our lives in two different ways. We can see it as potentially “the last day of our lives,” and use that to explore the beginnings of purpose. And we can always see it as “the first day of the rest of our lives,” and use that to explore the purpose of beginnings. Each day is an opportunity to remember that how we lead our lives

⁷ Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, *Restful Reflections*, 251-252

⁸ adapted from Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*,

is a step towards the person we will ultimately become. And so on this Rosh Hashanah 5768, may we get back in touch with both our destination and our journey. May we remember that even when we get off course, we always have an opportunity to return. May we remember that our greatest fulfillment comes not in reaching our goal, but in taking the steps to strive towards it. And so when Rosh Hashanah 5769 arrives, and we look back on this upcoming year, may we say that 5768 was a year in which we improved ourselves, our community, and our world.

Shanah tovah.

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