

Being Better

Congregation Betenu Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5780

Sam Blumberg

I've been biting my nails for about 30 years. Every so often, I make a concerted effort to stop. Multiple times I've made it several months without biting, only to catch a glimpse of a hangnail, say to myself, "it's just this one— then I'll cut the rest of them" and then I head back down the path of constant biting and hideous nailbeds. Lately my go-to method to try to curb the biting has been chewing gum and obsessively applying lotion. Amalia, my wife, even has a special sound that she uses to get me to notice my biting and, ideally, to stop. Still, no luck. Though I have pain from all the biting and I'm embarrassed by the way my nails and hands look, I'm no closer today to stopping than I was when I first took up the habit as a young child.

A few weeks ago I found myself at Market Basket, engaged in the mundane but necessary domestic task of food shopping for my family, when a woman's tattoo caught my eye. There, on her wrist, were the simple words: "Be better."

"Be better," I said to myself. Of course! Why didn't I think of that? If only I had a visible reminder at all times, reminding me to 'be better,' perhaps I could stop biting my nails. Perhaps I could kick a lot of my obnoxious habits with a visual prompt kept close.

"Be better" is a slogan I can get behind. It is, after all, the theme of Elul, the month preceding Rosh HaShanah, and of the High Holidays. Each High Holiday season we reflect on our triumphs and failures of the past year, and we resolve to be a better version of ourselves in

the year ahead. But, what does it really mean to “be better”? By whose standards? How do I measure “better”?

One way we might measure our ‘being better’ is setting goals for ourselves. I offer a method that I learned this summer— not only to articulate our goals, but to answer at the outset:

1. How do I plan to accomplish my goal?
2. How will I know that I’ve accomplished my goal? and not only that, but
3. How will *others* know that I’ve accomplished my goal?

By articulating, in detail, *how* we plan to accomplish our goals and how we will know we’ve accomplished them, we set ourselves up for greater success by envisioning what our lives might look like if we are to succeed. By involving friends and family in our goal-setting, we remain accountable to a third party, ensuring that we carry on practically in the ways we attempt to better ourselves.

But the truth is, Judaism has a built-in and ingenious system that helps us better ourselves, called *mitzvot*, most closely translated as commandments. In seeing the woman’s tattoo at Market Basket, I couldn’t help but think of the V’ahavta prayer, said after the Shema, which instructs us to bind words of Torah on our hands and between our eyes. Our rabbis of blessed memory understood this visual reminder to be the fastening of Tefillin, phylacteries, on our arms and on our heads, with little black boxes that contain passages from the Torah. Our rabbis took the injunction to bind the words of the Torah on our heads and on our hands as a *mitzvah*, as a commandment, in and of itself— that we should put on Tefillin as a reminder of all of the other commandments found in the Torah. Similarly, we are instructed in the passages that

follow the V'ahavta that we should look at the fringes of our *tzitzit* in order to remember all of G-d's commandments.

It would be too simplistic to say that doing more *mitzvot* makes us better people. I am not suggesting that keeping kosher or giving *tzedakah* in and of themselves make us better. However, part of the beauty of *mitzvot* is that they run the gamut of the human experience, guiding us as we navigate our most intimate relationships with partners and friends, regulating what we do with our time, and directing us ever-closer in our connection with the Divine. One way to think of our adherence to *mitzvot* is the model presented by Isaac Luria— that we are co-partners with G-d, gathering divine sparks and helping to repair the world with each *mitzvah* we perform. In this way, each time we do a *mitzvah* we not only make an effort at bettering ourselves, but we add a tally mark towards the positive for the whole world.

One of my favorite ways, though, of understanding our connection with *mitzvot* is from Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, from an essay he published in 1966. He writes:

“I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road there are many jewels. One is marked “Sabbath,” and one “Civil Rights” and one “Kashrut” and one “Honor Your Parents” and one “Study of Torah” and one “You Shall Be Holy.” There are at least 613 of them, and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up, and I pick them up. Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels as I walk the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up.

“I believe that God expects me to keep on walking Judaism Street and to carry away whatever I can of its commandments. I do not believe that God expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can.”

As individuals and as a community, we walk Judaism Street. Each year at this time we look back to see how far we’ve come, and we check our bags to see the jewels, the *mitzvot*, that we’ve picked up along the way. And at the same time, we look ahead on the road, never totally sure what the year has in store for us, but doing our best to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

And as we keep walking that road, we can ask ourselves, “What are the *mitzvot* I want to try to pick up this year? How will I know that I’ve accomplished my goals? How will others know that I’ve accomplished my goals?” Maybe I want to give more *tzedakah*, maybe I want to put more time towards the causes I care deeply about, maybe I want to deepen my Shabbat practice, maybe I want to be more proactive about checking in with my friends in times of need.

Whatever it is, Rosh HaShanah is the time when we recognize that we *can* be better, when we resolve to *be* better, and when we share with others our action plan that holds us accountable so that we can continue to walk Judaism Street in the year ahead, aspiring to be the person we know we are meant to be.

I invite everyone to take a moment, and think: what is one way I want to be better this year? How can I actually go about it? How will I know that I have accomplished my goal?

And now I invite you to turn to someone near you, and share with them your goal and your action plan...

Rosh HaShanah, according to Jewish tradition, is the sixth day of Creation, the day on which Adam and Eve were created. The Talmud¹ wonders why it was that Adam was created at the end of the sixth day, so close to the beginning of Shabbat. One answer is in order to make sure that if a person becomes haughty, one can be reminded that the mosquito was created before humankind, teaching us about humility— a beautiful answer— but one for a different sermon. Another answer given by the Talmud is that humanity was created close to the entrance of Shabbat so that the first people could immediately enter into the *mitzvah* of celebrating and keeping Shabbat.

We were put on this earth as imperfect beings. We know it and God knows it. But God also gave us the power to better the world, and to better ourselves through the performance of *mitzvot*. Each one of us was created with the potential to be the best version of ourselves, to continually refine our actions and to share ourselves— flaws and all— with the world around us. This is the year we can shed the habits we know don't suit us.

This is the year we can instill in ourselves new habits that will bring us closer to being the people we know we are meant to be.

This is the year we can try out a new *mitzvah*, to keep our footing on Judaism Street.

And maybe this year— *this year*— will be the year I stop biting my nails.

L'shana Tovah Umetukah— to a sweet New Year of health, happiness, and bettering ourselves, and *G'mar Chatimah Tovah*— may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

¹ Sanhedrin 38a