

I don't mean to brag...after all, it's Yom Kippur – not a day for boastful braggadocio. But I must say, I am a great “beginner.” I love to begin new projects. The beginning for me is the fun part! During the pandemic, especially, I started many a new hobby. When I began to enjoy embroidery, I purchased a mega-pack of 30 templates and kits, of which 23 still sit in a box waiting for my return...I began to enjoy watching competitive sailing, and so I bought 4 books on the subject and subscribed to the Nautical Channel, which only necessitated that I then subscribe to yet another streaming platform (which my husband, Scott, totally loved – he's always saying ‘we don't have nearly enough monthly subscriptions’...) Like I said, I am a great beginner. “Finisher” on the other hand...not so much.

So often in life, we find ourselves going all in – beginning another project, taking up a new hobby, starting a crash diet – that then peters out. Real change, real habit-forming, can be hard. And this time of year, as we celebrate the Jewish New Year, and engage in *teshuva*, and intention-setting for the year to come, so many of us can feel tempted to ‘go big’ – to set lofty goals for personal growth and change, that might ultimately be challenging to follow through on and achieve in 5785. Yom Kippur calls us to make resolutions, to look backwards with regret and atonement, and to look

forward with renewed commitment, and better behavior. And yet...how do we actually go about changing? Beginning, making our resolutions, sometimes, seems easy; finishing, though, following through...that's the real trick...

Every year, on Yom Kippur morning, we read *Parashat Nitzavim*. The Torah portion begins with the people assembled as Moses, standing on the steppe of Moab just outside the Promised Land, delivers his last oration.

Addressing the great crowd, and us today, in 2024, Moses declares:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach...No, [Torah] is very close to you, [בפיך ובלבבך] (*bi'ficha u'vilvavecha*) [It is] in your mouth and in your heart...¹

“[Torah] is in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut 30:14). What does this mean? Moses is telling his people, telling us, that Torah is in our hands now. It's not some distant thing – not something a great leader, like Moses, must obtain and interpret *for* us. Rather, Torah now lives in each of us – in our hearts and mouths. It's up to us to live out and embody the teachings of our tradition. Moses is throwing down a gauntlet – he's challenging *us* to step up,

¹ Deut 30:11, 14

compelling us, to put the beliefs of our hearts into action, creating lives governed and inspired by the values and wisdom of our Jewish tradition. It is a call to action, sounded every Yom Kippur morning – a command to dive in! But before we hurry off, ready to answer Torah’s invitation with lofty aspirations and promises to do it all, a story first...

There was once a man who missed his Jewish community, his Jewish identity. And each week, as he walked to his office for work, he would pass by his local synagogue, and sheepishly think, ‘I really should go more.’

Finally, one Friday morning, as he walked to work, he saw a man walking towards him. It was the local rabbi! Well, if that wasn’t a sign...Walking right up, he said to the rabbi, “Rabbi! It’s so good to see you! I was just thinking, you know, I haven’t been to Temple in ages, it’s been too long! But I’m ready now. What can I do? Can I head up the Cemetery Committee? Or maybe I should sign up to volunteer each week in the office? Or, can I reorganize the kitchen – I do love to cook? Oh! And what time are services again? I’m going to start coming every week!”

The rabbi smiled, and after thinking for a moment, said, “Buy a challah”

... “Buy a challah??” the man replied.

“Yes,” said the rabbi, “buy a challah.”

And so, confused, the man stopped by his local grocer, walked to the bakery section, and bought his challah. Later that night, he ate his challah with his dinner, and went to sleep.

The next week, as the man walked to work, he again ran into the rabbi! “Rabbi, I did what you said, I bought a challah. It was delicious, excellent suggestion. So anyways, I was thinking, I really do love to cook. Perhaps I should volunteer for the *Oneg* Committee?”

The rabbi smiled, and said, “How about you buy a challah?”

Perplexed, and, perhaps, a little offended that the rabbi didn’t seem to want his help at the Temple, the man again went to his local grocer, walked back to the bakery section, and bought another challah. And again, that Friday night, he enjoyed it with his dinner.

The following week, yet again, the same exchange: “Hello!” ...
“Can I...” “Buy a challah...”

Annoyed, and confused, the man again walked to his grocer, stomped back to the bakery section, and begrudgingly, bought another challah. And again, it was, admittedly, delicious with his Friday dinner.

The next week, the man didn’t run into the rabbi on his walk. But he had gotten used to that delicious challah with his Friday night dinner. And so, that week, he found himself headed for the grocers, before he even noticed where his feet were taking him.

And each week after that, another trip to the grocery, another challah with dinner.

And then...one week, as he was walking back to the bakery section, he passed by a display of Shabbat candles (and Chanukah candles, because grocery stores always have Chanukah candles out even if its summer), and he decided to buy a set of Shabbat candles and light them as part of his Friday meal.

The next week he ran into an old friend from Sunday School and invited him to dinner. The friend brought a bottle of wine, and they dined in style, and said *Kiddush* together.

And then...the man was regularly having not just dinner, but Shabbat dinner, with guests, and saying the Shabbat blessings, every week...

And then, one week, he began attending Shabbat services before dinner, and he did start volunteering to help clean up the *oneg*, because he had learned it was nice to help...

...And then...

...And then...

...And then...

Lasting change is hard. Discovering habits and rituals that work for you takes time. Like the zealous gentleman in our tale, many of us could use a reminder to slow down and take baby steps when we dive into something new. Torah might be calling us to action, but as we know, ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day,’ and us ‘good beginners’ should remember to slow down, and take the pressure off...Of course, not all of us are ‘quick starts.’ For every one of us who

runs full steam ahead into new opportunities or practices, there are those of us who hear Torah's call to action a little differently. Maybe you're feeling a little intimidated by Torah's rallying cry? Or maybe you're thinking, "I wouldn't know where to start? What does it even mean to 'embody Torah,' to increase our 'Jewish connections and actions'?" Or maybe you're thinking, "I am so busy these days. Where could I possibly find time to do one more thing? My cup, and calendar, is full." Sure, we're called to engage. But we're also, so very many of us, overbooked, overworked, overextended. As Ferris Bueller says, "Life moves pretty fast..."

Maybe we can't take on a whole new Jewish practice. Maybe we don't have time for a total shift in our Jewish engagement. Like many a forgotten New Year's Resolution, those initial sparks of change often fizzle out...leaving us frustrated at our lack of transformation, at the lofty goals we failed to achieve. But recently, in an interview with a New York Times columnist, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue in NY suggested that we strive to be "10% more Jewish." And this idea has stuck in my head! What would it look like to be just 10% more Jewish? 10% seems reasonable – I could do 10%...could you? If Torah is living in us, and calling us to engage more, to live

our Jewish identities out loud, to bolster our Jewish beliefs with actions, maybe we could try for a 10% change, or even, just a 1% change?!

In his 2018 work Atomic Habits, the author James Clear writes on the power of incremental change. He shares,

...improving by 1 percent isn't particularly notable – sometimes it isn't even *noticeable* – but it can be far more meaningful, especially in the long run. The difference a tiny improvement can make over time is astounding. Here's how the math works out: if you can get 1 percent better each day for one year, you'll end up thirty-seven times better by the time you're done...What starts as a small win...accumulates into something much more. Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement.²

Now, a confession: I was a French major who struggled to pass Economics in college. So, I can't attest to Clear's math. But I called my dad, a Math and Physics major, and he assures me that these numbers do, in fact, add up... What Clear is showing us is that small changes matter. We can take up new habits, new interests, new practices and rituals if we don't bite off more than

² *Atomic Habits*, Clear (Avery; 2018), pg 15.

we can chew. So, I ask again, in the New Year, as Torah calls you to live your Judaism ‘out loud,’ as Moses says to you, “Torah is in *your* mouth and in *your* heart,” could you be 1% more Jewish this year? Dreaming even bigger, could you be 10% more Jewish?

What would it look like to be 1 or 10% more involved with your Jewish community? Maybe you can set a goal of joining us at 1 or 2 more programs than last year? We’d love to see you at weekly Torah study, or making PB&J sandwiches for Micah Ministries, or at one of our holiday Get Ready with Me programs this year. Have you signed up for Sukkot Across KC? Or have you heard about our spring Mexico City trip – the early bird discount has been extended. If you’re looking for something a little closer to home: you could write a condolence message to someone in our community who has suffered a loss, or make a congratulation’s call when a member welcomes in a new life to their family. What if you made it a habit to say a short prayer of gratitude before checking your phone in the morning, or before closing your eyes at night, or joined us online for our virtual Daily Minyan? We know you can’t do it all. But maybe you can do just 1 more thing than last year?

Jewish tradition offers us so much. Ritual, programs, community, connection to the Divine, beliefs and values. We've been gifted this beautiful heritage, this special identity that connects us across space and time to millions of other Jews and thousands of other Jewish communities. Our Jewish identities are something to be cherished, nourished and nurtured. This year, in 5785, let's set an attainable goal. Not to all become super-rabbis tomorrow; not to increase our Jewish involvement to unsustainable levels; not even to become perfect as we engage in *teshuva* (repentance), and *cheshbon hanefesh* (the accounting of our souls). Rather, let's aim for something manageable. 1% further. 10% growth. Let's be and do just a little more this year.

I know this isn't always easy – living out these goals in practice can be hard. If you have found yourself drifting away from our community, this is your invitation to start making your way back. If you're struggling to find a way in, please reach out to us, and we will help you. In times like these, when the world can feel dark and scary, when hope is something we desperately desire but are unsure of how to nurture it, with antisemitism on the rise, *this* is the time to lean into your community, to be *more* Jewish, not less. Torah is calling you – we are calling you – will you answer?

Of course, this isn't just about actions and rsvp's to programs. It's also about engaging our Jewish values in our everyday lives more, as well. Are we giving voice to the Torah in our heart when we're unkind, impatient, selfish? Are we speaking words of Torah when we snap at others, when we gossip, when we parrot harmful views? Are we embodying the values of our tradition when we act without *rachamim*, compassion, or *derech erez*, ethical action? Perhaps not. While we cannot become 'perfect embodiments of Torah' overnight, we can become better – even just by 1%...That is what the *teshuva* that this High Holy Day season is asking of us demands. To return to our better selves, to grow and evolve and change – not all at once, but bit by bit; that's a beginning we can all make, a goal we *can* attain in 5785.

This year, what is your 1-10%? Where can you 'turn up the dial' on your Jewish stereo and gift yourself just a 'little more Jewish' in your day-to-day life? Where can you strive to more fully embody our Torah with your mouth and in your heart – with your actions, words and deeds? Let's not start too big; or worry about doing it all. Let's, instead start small...Why don't you begin with buying a challah?

Shanah Tovah!