

We Are Enough
(Erev Rosh Hashanah 2021/5782)
By Rabbi Samantha Natov

“There is a kind of myth that we can hold onto balance for even more than a short time, but to be alive is to be in motion,” says Rabbi Samantha Natov this Erev Rosh Hashanah. “In prayer, we call to something infinite that unifies us beyond time and space. Tonight, we get to start again.”

Tonight, we get to start again. What a gift! All the missteps of the past year fade into the distance. All the regrets we carry are now stepping stones to a better path. It’s a moment filled with hope and potential.

There’s a Jewish legend that says when we were each created, we were tied to God with a string. Sins can damage the string, but if we repent during the High Holy Days, an angel comes, makes a knot and repairs the string.

We all commit wrongdoings throughout our lifetimes, and our strings become full of knots. But a string with many knots is far shorter than one without them. And so, our repentance brings us closer to God.

Rosh Hashanah is filled with a kind of spiritual momentum. Our prayers surround us with the sounds of *t’shuvah* — repentance. We remember who we are at our core and who we want to be as we tilt our intentions towards making changes in our lives and shifts in our behaviors.

Yet, we’ve been here before — at this moment of starting again.

Enacting *t’shuvah* is actually really hard. We have such good intentions, but still, we make poor decisions and walk down old paths of self-demise. Why is it so hard to follow through on our commitments? We are intelligent, thoughtful and caring people. We have the capacity to do many things — from building beautiful relationships to pursuing careers and fulfilling personal goals. Surely, we have the capacity to make change. So what takes us away from the paths we wish to travel? Why is it such a struggle?

The rabbis refer to this as a kind of battle of competing desires. They taught that every one of us has a *Yetzer HaRah* and the *Yetzer HaTov* — an impulse to do evil and an impulse to do good. The *Yetzer HaRah*, the inclination to follow our more selfish desires, only becomes stronger as we feed it. Desire is an important motivator in our lives. But when we are insatiable for things that are destructive to our bodies and spirits, then feeding our *yetzer* is adding fuel to a destructive fire. The unchecked *yetzer* can cause us to spread anger in hateful words and hateful actions, or to take everything we want for ourselves, ignoring the need around us. The unchecked *yetzer* also leads us to habitual behaviors we wish we could stop. Smoking leads to more smoking. Eating sugar leads to cravings for more sugar, and so on. As our sages taught: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* — doing good deeds leads to doing more good deeds, but

transgressing leads to more transgressions. Positive energy fuels more positivity; negative energy does the same.

We see this play out in the following Cherokee story: A grandfather was teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil — he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The grandfather simply replied: "The one you feed."

The wolves are our *yetzers*. Yet, the answer of feeding the good wolf — the *Yetzer HaYov* — is much more complicated than it appears. We may think we are feeding the good wolf, when we are really feeding our egos. We are pretty sophisticated at convincing ourselves that a certain path is okay, when we know in our hearts it is not.

We house within ourselves a plethora of paradoxes. But opposites can and do exist together. The challenge is to find a way of integrating and accepting all the parts of ourselves — all of who we are, no matter how seemingly paradoxical.

We contain both dark and light. We contain both bad and good. We contain both ugliness and beauty. We contain both rigidity and freedom.

We may want to suppress parts of ourselves, but we can't really wipe the slate clean. It's not really a choice — those parts are still there. What we need is integration and balance. And balancing is a process of constant adjustment.

A mathematical model suggests that when we walk we are actually falling and then catching ourselves; each step a readjustment. We are always recalibrating our actions in ways large and small.

It is the same with balancing our lives. There is a kind of myth that we can hold onto balance for even more than a short time. As if we can arrive at the destination called "balance." But this definition of balance as a place of arrival is a falsehood; to be alive is to be in motion.

There is an ancient Jewish question: "*Ayeikah?*" — "Where are you?" Where are you, truly, in this moment of your life?

In the Garden of Eden, God asks Adam, “Where are you?” God knows exactly where Adam is. So when God asks Adam, “Where are you?” — God means, “Where are you in this moment?”

Often, we are unaware of where we are. We walk around on autopilot. We are so used to compartmentalizing. Our minds and bodies are on totally different planes and our spirits, ignored. We habitually suppress parts of ourselves that need attention. We ignore our broken hearts.

These are not normal times. This is a year that has been completely upended. Our routines, our expectations, our assumptions have all been turned upside down. We have been walking through a tornado of trauma. We are aware of our vulnerability.

And we are tired. How many times have you intended to do something but you’re too exhausted to make a move? We are suffering from a deep exhaustion — an almost soulful exhaustion. Just the thought of engaging can make us want to lie down and turn off. How do we keep pushing ahead when we are just so worn out from the ongoing trauma of this year and a half?

And we don’t just exhaust ourselves; we exhaust the earth as well. We demand so much of it. We are at the beginning of the *shmita* year, an ancient cycle in which we let the land rest and replenish every seven years. During the *shmita* year, crops cannot be commercially harvested. The concept of *shmita* gives us a new way of seeing things. No matter how much we want to just keep going, to keep being productive, we must stop. And this makes us look at our lives differently.

Can we just be? Can we stay still for a while? Can we turn our loving energy inward? Everybody, every living thing needs time to rest and regenerate. When we take and take without end, we are stealing the future. So much damage has already been caused — from the ozone layer, to near extinct species of wildlife, to increasingly hot temperatures and uninhabitable places.

Similarly, we sometimes act as if time will open up for us. We work towards being hyper productive; we have lengthy to-do lists and delay doing some of what we feel is really meaningful to us for a future time.

But what we mostly fail to take in is that the tasks are unending. As soon as we finish responding to email, more email comes in. But we do not have infinite time. This is not to say the solution is to leave our email unanswered. Rather to be honest with ourselves about time. We need to find ways of being present for all that we truly value. We know that it is impossible to complete all our tasks, but we can put our limited resource of time toward what we really care about.

Kierkegaard said we have an infinite soul with a finite body. Living with that knowledge is very confusing and difficult. We are at once both connected with the divine, who is timeless, beginning-less, endless, limitless — and with nature, the earth, that is finite and limited. We

have a hard time balancing these two conditions — feeling a spirituality within us that is beyond space and time, and yet knowing that life itself is not forever.

And time keeps going on. Sometimes the days feel as if they are racing by and others as if they are dragging on, but they pass all the same, and we are aware that they are finite. But we can have experiences that feel as if they disrupt the flow of time. Whether it's experiencing the profound beauty of nature, or listening to an emotional piece of music, or connecting with another human being on a deep level, or losing ourselves in a moment of prayer. Profound moments can take us out of time.

In prayer, we call to something infinite that unifies us beyond time and space.

Sh'ma Yisrael — Listen, O Israel. We call *Sh'ma*, calling out not only to God, but also to the spark of holiness within ourselves and within every human being, searching for the holiness beyond ourselves that unifies us.

Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

We are all part of God's creation, and we are responsible for God's creation. The Chassidic masters say: There is only God; the whole universe exists within God.

So why do we feel so broken? How do we find unity within ourselves? How do we gain a sense of wholeness? How do we live a meaningful life?

A rabbi saw five of her students returning from the market, riding their bicycles. When they arrived at synagogue, the rabbi asked, "There is a lesson in everything. Tell me, Why did you choose to ride your bicycles?"

The first student replied, "The bicycle is carrying this bag filled with apples. I did not want to carry them on my back!"

The rabbi said, "You are smart! When you grow old, you will be glad you didn't strain your back."

The second student replied, "I love to watch the trees and fields pass by as I roll down the path!"

The rabbi commended the second student: "Your eyes are open, and you see the world."

The third student replied, "When I ride my bicycle, I sing a familiar melody, a *niggun*."

The rabbi praised the third student, "You know how to put your mind at ease."

The fourth student replied, "When I ride my bicycle, I feel as if I am in harmony with all sentient beings."

The rabbi said, "You are aware of your connection to every living thing. You are compassionate."

The fifth student replied, "I ride my bicycle to ride my bicycle."

The rabbi sat down at the feet of the fifth student and said, "You are my rabbi."

Each student represents an aspect of living a meaningful life. The first one is practical: we need to carry the apples; our physical needs come first. The second one is experiential: we need to engage all our senses to experience the world around us, to taste every morsel of food and feel every hug. The third one is prayerful: we cherish the moments when we are able to transcend ourselves, through prayer, music, or other expressions of the ineffable. The fourth is compassionate: our relationships define our lives. The fifth is completely present in the moment. We don't need a reason to ride the bike. We do it because it is a way to travel through life.

And in some sense, it's the most simple answer: The purpose of your life is to live your life. Sometimes our very lives are a prayer. When we live our everyday moments with openness and intention, we are connected with the now. We turn down the noise of our past regrets, and the noise of worrying about what the future will bring.

As spend so much time thinking about an imagined future — when we will have the means to live as we please — likewise, we hold onto memories and regrets, wanting to return to a time we remember as better, or we want to relive the past and rectify a mistake.

Today the shofar cries for us. It's broken sound an ancient request to be whole once more. It tells us we have a choice: we can choose to feed our Yetzer HaTov — inclination to do good. The shofar is an alarm, it's redemption, it's the sound of the natural world — the ram's horn — and the spiritual — a call to God. It's the existential sound of time passing year to year, generation to generation and age to age and yet, it's also a call to this very moment — it implores us: be here now, pay attention. Be present to this moment that is your life, with all of its complexities, knowing that you will find a way again and again to be whole.