

In 1992, Barbara Scrivner was poor and desperate. She was a single mother who quit work to care for her newborn child. Her husband Richard was serving time in prison. When visiting her husband in prison, he suggested that she sell Methamphetamine, that she deal meth for his buddies who apparently were manufacturers, in order to make ends meet. She dealt drugs until she could pay the bills, and then stopped. A year later, the manufacturers were arrested. Despite her minimal involvement, and because of the mandatory minimums law on the books at the time, she received a sentence of 360 months, or 30 years, in federal prison. After serving in prison for twenty years, her then infant daughter is now a grown adult, having grown up without her mother by her side. Last winter, she received a call from her mom. Barbara was called into the wardens office in a federal prison in Northern California and told that she was being moved into a halfway house in Fresno, near where her adult daughter lives. At the beginning of this summer, she was released. Her

petition for presidential clemency was approved, and she was given a second chance, proving that she had changed and was ready to begin life again.

What was it that made her change possible? She said that after decades in prison, she felt like she was a different person, that she had changed. But did it really take twenty years in prison for her to prove that she was different? I watched an interview with Barbara Scrivner this summer and I couldn't get her out of my head. Upon release, she was embraced by her daughter Alanna, and her grandson who she was meeting for the first time. Barbara's story stuck with me because it showed how hard it is to change. It didn't only highlight the failings of the criminal justice system. It highlighted the difficulty to change. The difficulty to make a true transformative change. For her, change took time. She later said that those years in prison, regardless of how just or unjust her sentence was, allowed her to understand who she was and who she wanted to be. For her, change took time.

Time is a major factor in our ability to change. Each moment, each milestone, we signal a change in time with the words of Shehechyanu. *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam Shehechyanu, v'Kiyemanu, v'Hegiyanu Lazman HaZeh. Praised are You, Adonai, Our God, ruler of time and space, for granting us life, sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment.*

These words are emotional words, acknowledging that with every lifecycle event and celebration, with every holiday and passing year, with every new beginning, we pause to honor the passing of time. As we lit candles and welcomed in the New Year on Sunday evening, we said these same words. Yet, this blessing is passive. We sit around and wait for time to pass, suggesting that it is the passage of time that has caused us to change and allowed us to change.

That is somewhat true: think about it for a moment - how are you different than you were twenty years ago, or a decade ago, or five years ago, or even a few months ago? Such change though,

has much more to do with life stages and circumstances, and little to do with our own actions.

If there is one thing we learn from the High Holy Days, it is that we cannot just wait for the passage of time. We come together to do more than just wait for time to pass us by. We come to actively change. We know change is hard, but Rosh Hashanah is our belief statement that change is really possible. *Shana* in Hebrew means “year,” but it is also the root of the Hebrew for “change.” Rosh Hashanah then becomes the beginning of our opportunity to change. If we thought it was easy, then we wouldn’t have this ritual system set up in place to allow for our mistakes.

Year after year, we know we have a list of transgressions piling up, a bread box full of crumbs ready to be washed away in the waters, awaiting the moment to let go of our mistakes with a promise to change for the better.

Our liturgy gives us direction and show us how to change.

U'Teshuvah, u'Tefillah, u'Tzedakah, Ma'avirin et Ro'ah

Hag'zeirah. That through Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah, we can truly change. So we spend these days, making a commitment to do all three. Yet, I think we overlook the true meaning of each of these pillars of change.

How do we change? Teshuvah. We understand Teshuvah to mean repentance but it really means more than that. The Hebrew root of the word though means “to return.” To do Teshuvah, we must literally leave some place and go somewhere else.

Noelle Hancock was a journalist living in New York City, making a nice six-figure salary, when she began feeling disenchanted by the big city lifestyle. “I felt stressed, uninspired, disconnected,” she said. “It seemed I spent my life staring at screens: laptop, cell phone.” She explained on the Today Show earlier this year that she was looking for a different kind of life, so she posted on Facebook, asking for suggestions of a Caribbean

Island to move to. She broke the lease to her apartment, sold her belongings, and bought a one-way plane ticket to St. John, one of the Virgin Islands. She moved there and despite her journalism degree from Yale, decided to take a \$10 an hour job scooping cones at the local ice cream parlor. In her Today Show interview, she said she “wanted to share [her story] to show people that it’s okay to make a new path for yourself, even if it’s a life that other people disapprove of or don’t understand.”

We must leave where we are – be that physically or metaphorically – and be prepared to go elsewhere. To go to that which we know, to return, or go to destinations not yet traveled, yet places that we are supposed to be.

In the book of Genesis, Abraham is commanded to go on his *Lech Lecha* journey. God commands him to go and pack up his things, to leave his home, and to go to a place that God will ultimately show him. He is sent to the Promised Land, without knowing where that is. For ultimately it is was not the destination

that allows Abraham to change. Rather, it is the act of leaving, spiritually moving himself and his soul to a different place.

Along the way, he changes his name, he changes his family lineage, he changes who he ultimately is.

In Tractate Rosh Hashanah of the Babylonian Talmud, we find the well-known teaching: *Mishne Makom, Mishne Mazal*, often translated as: change your place and you will change your luck. I'd like to suggest we translate this differently: change your place, and you change your destiny. I am not suggesting that we pack up our belongings and move overseas, or to the west coast, or even to a different home down the street – although that is quite a properly trend in our area. However, I do know that for much of the 20th century, the American Dream was focused on the accumulation of wealth and material goods. Now, that has changed. The American Dream is about being happy and a change must be made if we want to make that happen. Are you stuck in a job which makes you miserable? Do you feel stuck in

the monotony of your routine? What have you been waiting to learn that you have been putting off? When was the last time you challenged yourself? That you explored the world? That you allowed yourself to try something new? Changing our surroundings is just as much metaphorical as it is literal. You can physically stay exactly where you are and still change your place. Change your place and you change yourself.

How do we change? Tefillah. Prayer. Worship. Wrestling and Struggling with God. Blessing God and crying to God. Laughing with God and yelling at God. Rabbi Mark Borovitz runs Beit Teshuvah, a Jewish residential treatment center in the Culver City neighborhood of Los Angeles. Ordained over a decade ago at what was then the University of Judaism, Borovitz jokes that while many rabbis end up in prison after being ordained, he was the first to get accepted to rabbinical school after already having a lengthy rap sheet. In his memoir, *The Holy Thief*, he speaks about his life as a mobster, gangster, con man, gambler, and addict.

Only a teenager when his father died, he learned that his barber in Cleveland had ties to the local mob, and was introduced to a life of crime. He says that “I lived a good part of my life, both as a criminal and even in sobriety, always feeling half a step off. I didn’t have a purpose. And because I felt that I was defective from this place of being half a step off, I didn’t matter, and nothing mattered.” One of the many times I met with him, he explained it to me in more blunt terms: “I had a hole in my heart,” he said. “I tried to fill it with crime and theft, with sex and drugs, with alcohol and gambling. But it was a God-shaped hole in my heart.”

Like trying to fit a round peg in a square hole, there was no amount of crime that could fill this Divine void. Finally, he realized, the only thing that could fill what was missing was God, a change in belief.

Belief. In Genesis, while journeying to eventually meet the love of his life Rachel, Jacob, who up until this point was a deceptive trickster and con artist, lies down for a rest. During his

dreams, he sees God's angels around him and upon awakening, he declares in Genesis 28:16 – "*Yesh Adonai BaMakom Hazeh v'Anochi Lo Yadati*," God was in this place and I did not know. Jacob, who went on to become Israel, the figurehead of our people, changed his belief and changed his perspective. Doing so gave him permission to see the world differently. Tefillah is not about prayer. It is not about showing up to synagogue, either out of obligation, or guilt, or desire, or love, or because we were dragged here by our parents. Tefillah is a change in belief, and a willingness to be open to that change.

In the year ahead, challenge your beliefs. Where is God in this world? Where is God in your life? Allow yourself to remove the blinders from your eyes and appreciate the everyday miracles that are all around us. Even in the darkest of moments, search for the sliver of light in the darkness. Change is about seeing God where you did not before, but most importantly, it is about seeing the Divine spark in each individual. A change in belief allows us to

look in the mirror and see that we are made in God's Image. That we are holy. A change in belief allows us to see ourselves differently, allows us to believe in ourselves in ways that we never have before. That we are good enough. That we are smart enough. That we have something to teach and share with the world. That we have value. We cannot change unless we are prepared to change our beliefs, to see God in ourselves.

How do we change? Tzedakah. Charity. Philanthropy. But more than charity or even justice, Tzedakah is about how we treat and interact with others. Tzedakah is about how we care about others and how they care about us. This is about more than just helping those who are less fortunate. This is about expanding our circles so that there is no longer an 'us' and a 'them.' This is about cultivating new friendships to truly make sense of the promise to love your neighbor.

As children, our friendships are in some ways chosen for us – who is in our class, who is in our bunk at camp, who lives on our

street. As adults, our friendships are still determined for us – who are the parents of our children’s classmates, who are our co-workers, etc. It’s rare that we find friends and make deep connections with others.

Lauren was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis as a baby. CF is a genetic disorder that mostly affects the lungs, causing mucus buildup, which if left untreated, prevents someone with CF from being able to breathe. Half a century ago, many with CF died as a child. Now, the vast majority are able to live well into adulthood, even having children of their own. Lauren, spent her mornings and evenings, from a young age, getting massages meant to break up the muchus, making it easier for her to breathe. The one thing she was instructed was to never come within three feet of anyone else with CF. The fear was that either could carry a dormant bacteria in their lungs, bringing serious risk to the other. So, Lauren joined an online support group for adults with CF, and when she became pregnant at 28, she met another woman

online, the same age, also pregnant, suffering from the same disease, who lived two blocks away.

Yet, they could never meet in person, or be in the same room as each other. They chatted online most nights, sometimes having dinner in front of their screens, sometimes giving themselves a pedicure while sitting in front of their monitors.

Lauren said this friend whom she never met in person understood her like no one else did. Their children are now eight years old, and they still talk regularly, still close friends, still never having met face-to-face.

While we live in a world where much of our interaction is no longer in person, we still need interaction. We read in Genesis chapter 2, that it is not good for man to be alone. Tzedakah is a reminder that we are not alone, and that we cannot truly change if we are alone. Change involves caring for others, taking responsibility for others, and investing in others. Subsequently,

change involves others caring for us as well. Ultimately then, change involves our friendship circles.

When Naomi lost her sons and her husband, widowed and childless, she sent her daughters-in-law away. Yet, Ruth remained clinging to her, declaring an everlasting connection with her. This was about more than just family and about more than just friendship. This was justice, caring for another person. “*Ki el Asher telchi, eilech, u’va’asher talini alin - amech ami, ve’elohayich eloyai.*” Wherever you go, I will go, where you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people. Your God shall be my God. Caring for someone means making their problems your problems, their successes your successes. It means understanding that we are all connected.

Cling to those we love and care about, just as Ruth did with Naomi. When was the last time you actually, genuinely asked a friend how he or she was doing? I am sure you ask a ton of people how they are doing all the time - The cordial “hi, how are

you?” in the elevator or lobby, or on the train. You expect a “good, how are you?” brief response so you can continue on your commute. But when was the last time we really checked in with those that we love. We cannot change by ourselves. We depend on each other -- true justice in a way -- to help us change.

Reach out to someone who you haven't spoken to in a long time and let them know that you are thinking about them. Befriend someone new, someone in need of your companionship, someone who inspires you to be better, to be different, to try new things, someone who is alone and could use someone to talk to, someone who helps you become your true self. They need you, but they would never say it. And we need them as well. Whether an old friend or a new acquaintance, challenge yourself in the new year to truly connect with others, to have a hand to hold and a shoulder to lean on as you commit to walking down this journey to be different, to be better.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam

Shehechyanu, v'Kiyemanu, v'Hegiyanu Lazman HaZeh. Praised are You, Adonai, Our God, ruler of time and space, for granting us life, sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment.

Now, we cannot afford to waste time waiting. If we want to change ourselves, change each other, and change the world, that it begins at this moment. Let us allow the shofar blasts to be a wake up call for all of us. To be better. To be different. To try. To change. To begin anew. And may we have the power, courage, ability, and wisdom to make the changes that we seek become reality. Shana Tova.