

From the Rabbi's Desk
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D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5776

Just Do It!

Rabbi Lisa Gelber started our last Selichot program with the following question: *"How do you want to be next year?"*

"I want to be more tolerant," "more compassionate," "at peace with the world," were a few of the insightful answers we heard ten days ago.

If what I just said sounds familiar, it is because you heard it yesterday, from me.

Now *"How do you want to be next year?"* is different from *"where do you want to be next year"* (in a Caribbean Island sipping a piña colada) and also different from *"what do you want to do next year"* (climb Mount Everest).

"How do you want to be next year?" points more to inner, transformational change.

"How do you want to be next year?"

We cannot write today, but we can still compile a list.



"How do you want to be next year?"

Yes...

- More compassionate
- Kinder

- More focused
- More relaxed
- More patient
- Less angry
- Less overweight
- More understanding
- A better father
- A better husband
- A better son
- More assertive
- More generous
- At peace with the world
- More helpful
- More attuned
- More humble

Lists are contagious. You hear how other people want to be next year and you say to yourself: "now that I think about it..."

As a matter of fact, while preparing this dvar Torah, I read a survey about the top ten New Year's Resolutions and I can relate to almost all of them:



1. Spend More Time with Family & Friends
2. Fit in Fitness
3. Lose Weight
4. Quit Smoking
5. Enjoy Life More
6. Quit Drinking
7. Get Out of Debt

8. Learn Something New
9. Help Others
10. Get Organized

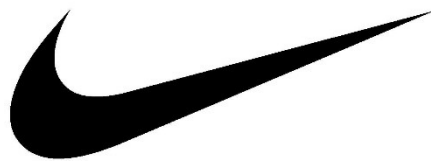
But let's go back to our common list. It looks good, ambitious, but good.

Now, yesterday, I spoke about getting from point A to point B. If where we are now is our point A, our individual or common list is our point B. This is where I am, and this is where I ought to be. It sounds good! It is a plan!

The problem is that this was, with a different twist, the same dvar Torah I delivered last year, and the year before, and the year before....For the last ten, fifteen, twenty years, I have been compiling lists of "how I want to be next year." My New Year's resolutions look like a Déjà vu from last year. I have seen this movie. I have been in it!



So in this Rosh Hashanah, this will be for me the symbol of transformation:



No, it is not a shofar. It is the Nike logo. Just Do It!

Manes, you know what needs to be done!

Stop making lists!

Stop talking about lists!

Stop talking about how in previous years you made lists!

In other words: stop talking!

Yesterday you said tomorrow. Last year you said this coming year. Just do it!

My list is a generous one, a pretty comprehensive one. My problem is not lack of resolutions, but lack of action.



Now, as you know (or can guess), English is not my mother tongue. Consequently, I ask people (usually more than one) to proofread what I write. And since they are going to go to the trouble of reading what I write anyway, I ask them to provide me with feedback on the content as well.

The first person I asked to proofread this dvar Torah was my daughter Daniela. She checked it for grammatical mistakes, added comas here and there, and at the end this is what she wrote:

Abba, the motto "Just Do It!" is a great one when you are hesitant about doing something. For example, this motto might work for someone who is uncertain about quitting a soul-sucking job and exploring new possibilities, or for someone who always talks about exercising but doesn't actually do it. However, we aren't hesitant about being more patient, and we aren't lazy and big talkers about being more compassionate. We just don't have such clear-cut ways of doing so.

So, telling your congregants "Just Do It: Be more patient!" or "Just Do It: Be more humble!" isn't exactly helpful.

"So, what would be helpful?" I asked Daniela.

"Perhaps," she says, "focus instead on figuring out your own path to the items on your big 'to do list.' Set concrete goals for the things you would like to accomplish. Yesterday, on the first Day of Rosh Hashanah, you spoke about re-routing if you get lost. What about speaking about how to make your own GPS in the first place?"

For example, if you want to work on your patience, you can begin:

Current Location: short temper.

Desired Location: more patience.

Step 1: Focus on the things that trigger your short temper.

Step 2: identify ways to avoid those triggers.

Step 3: Take deep breaths/see it from the other perspective/figure out a productive solution instead when you encounter those triggers.

Step 4: Journal your frustrations to get out the anger and actively work through your struggles with your temper.

Another one, if you want to work on being more attuned, here is an idea:

Current Location: Disconnected from others

Desired Location: more attuned.

Step 1: Go out of your way to say "hi" or "good morning" to the people you usually interact with, at work, at shul, in your family.

Step 2: Make small talk with them (yes, small talk can be a first step towards big talk), ask them how they are doing, how was their weekend, etc.

Step 3: Without giving up steps 1 and 2, exchange a little more information. Tell them about you and your family and ask them about their family. Try to remember names and to find points of connection.

Step 4: Do small things to show care and connection: send them a card on their birthdays, etc.

I thanked Daniela for her feedback. It helped me translate action words into action plans.

Now, I did it for two items in my list but it can be done for all of them. A concrete path can be paved for humility, for generosity, for becoming a better husband, a better father. Using again the GPS metaphor, it may not be enough to write down your current location and your final destination, but you may need to figure it out the stops along the way; knowing that each stop will bring you closer, knowing that love and patience with yourself are essential if you really wish to change.

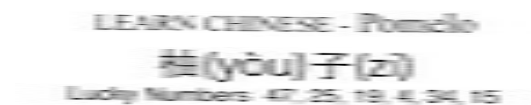
Let me leave you with a story of serendipity.

A few weeks ago, my family and I were invited to Annie Chan's restaurant. The food is good; the company was even better. We love Chinese food. After all, we are Jewish.

Now, as you know, a Chinese dinner is not complete without fortune cookies.



Now, who doesn't like fortune cookies? You may not like eating them, but opening them and reading the fortune is something I cannot resist. Even if your fortune isn't anything special, at least you can learn some words in Chinese and get "lucky numbers."



That day I learn to say "pomelo" in Chinese, I learned that my lucky numbers are 47, 25, 19, 4, 34 and 15, but the most powerful lesson I learned was in the fortune itself:



Stop trying to do it. Just do it. It is not about what we are going to do in this coming year (I believe we already covered this point enough), but about how to do it, and eventually about doing it!

Master of the Universe. We wish to become men and women of action. Our last year's resolution list is actually still good for this year; help us to overcome the impulse to compose yet another list, to write down more things to do. Give us the determination to actually do a little of all we say we wish to accomplish. Help us to transform our big plans into measurable goals, one step at a time, one stop at a time in the GPS of life.

May this year be one of less talking and more doing, and may all of us and our loved ones be blessed with a healthy, peaceful, joyous and sweet year. Amen.