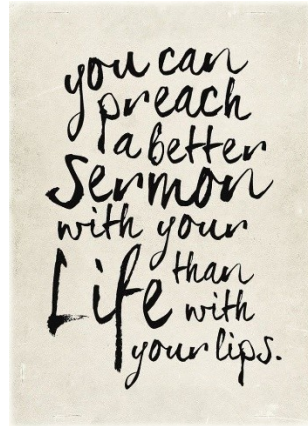


From the Rabbi's Desk  
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(With appreciation to Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, Rabbi Shai Held, and Joan Hausman)  
Hillcrest Jewish Center

**The Sermon of Your Life**

**D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah**

**5780**



One or two months before the High Holy days, several rabbinic organizations start advertising rabbinic forums or conferences to help rabbis prepare for the High Holy Days. The New York Board of Rabbis, AIPAC, the Long Island Board of Rabbis, and the Hadar Institute, among others, offer rabbinic High Holy Days Seminars, sermon workshops, and days of reflection on the High Holy Days Torah readings. I myself usually attend one or two of these gatherings every year, usually the ones sponsored by AIPAC and the New York Board of Rabbis.

The AIPAC rabbinic symposium this year was attended by more than 400 rabbis from all over the country, looking for inspiration and ideas for their High Holy Days sermons. The New York Board of Rabbis' High Holy Day seminary, for example, provides the participants with an opportunity to learn Torah from great individuals, as well as to hear rabbinic colleagues in different congregations sharing their favorite sermons.

Religious leaders, mostly, but not only in the Christian tradition, are often called "*preachers*," since preaching is an easy way to identify one of the main activities religious leaders do.

As rabbis, many times we try to underplay the importance of the preaching part of our work, by calling ourselves teachers and by emphasizing the pastoral part of our vocation. The truth, however, is that rabbis take their preaching job very seriously, especially around the High Holy Days, and that is the reason you find so many jokes about rabbis on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, especially targeting the length of their preaching.

In the past, rabbis not only worked tirelessly on their High Holy Days' sermons, but they even gave their sermons titles before they delivered them so everybody knew what the topic was going to be. If you still have at home some of the Memorial Bulletins of Hillcrest Jewish Center from the time of Rabbi Mowshowitz, you will see that each of his Yom Kippur sermons had a title. The one of 1982 was, for example, "The Sin of Silence." The one in 1979, "Our People's Strength." The one in 1977, "The Divine Quality."

Now rabbis take their preaching job very seriously during the High Holy Days for one simple reason: because they have a large captive audience and they feel they have a unique opportunity to effect change in their congregants by preaching the sermon of their lives.

When rabbis meet with colleagues after the High Holy Days, the first question inevitably is: "*Nu, how was it? Did you hit a home run?*" In Argentina we don't have baseball as a major sport so we use a soccer expression: "*an unbelievable goal from midfield.*" (*Un gol de media cancha*).

Rabbi Marshal Meyer, of blessed memory, the founder of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, used to greet his students the day after Yom Kippur by telling them: "go ahead, tell me your success!"

Indeed, many rabbis believe that if they could have people's undivided attention for 30 minutes, they could hammer their powerful words in such a way that change would be inevitable, and everything they wish to happen, would happen. People would start coming to shul every week, congregants would double their Kol Nidrei pledges, young people would feel a connection to Israel, and everybody would become kinder and more compassionate.

All I need to do is to deliver my "killer sermon."

And the *killer sermon* is delivered, and people tell the rabbi: "you hit a home run!" And the congregants mean what they say and the rabbi believes what he hears, and everybody seems happy.

The problem is that people don't start coming to shul every week, congregants don't double their Kol Nidrei pledges, young people still don't feel a connection to Israel, and most people don't become kinder and more compassionate because of the rabbi's killer sermon.

Jeffrey Kotler, a psychologist who writes for *Psychology Today*, sustains that we don't really know what prompts people to effect significant transformations in their lives that endure over time. He writes, however, that "*most life-changing alterations take place in daily life when you are going about your usual routines.*"<sup>1</sup>

Some people might change drastically as a product of a traumatic experience (think about Jonah in the fish, for example), but very few, if any, effect significant transformations in their lives because of a single killer sermon, or motivational speech. Yes, people are moved by speeches, they may cry, they may be moved to think that change in their lives is indeed necessary, but to change, to move from point A to point B, is another story.

Curt Wang, an executive coach at Make the Leap! Coaching, invites us to look at change as a process. He explains: "*When launching a significant change initiative, one of the biggest mistakes leaders make is to view the change as an event that happens at a single point in time. Accepting and then embracing change is a process, not an event.*"<sup>2</sup>

Motivational speakers, including some of the people who speak at rabbinic High Holy Days forums, may want us to think that all you need is the one hit, that the sky is the limit, that we can all change overnight. The truth, however, is more complex.

*"Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves,*

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Kotler Ph.D. What Really Leads to Change in People's Lives? In:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/change/201307/what-really-leads-change-in-people-s-lives>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amanet.org/articles/change-is-a-process-not-an-event/>

*birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily.*"<sup>3</sup>

We like to believe that we come to this world as a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, and that all our decisions are the product of our free will. The truth, however, is that we are heavily conditioned: As Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explains: *"Let us examine ourselves. How often do we make use of our free will? Personal disposition, education, habit, and interests maintain almost absolute rule over us from childhood to old age. It is even possible for a person to go through her entire life without ever making use of her free will! ... If we really examine ourselves, we'll see that we use our freedom only on rare occasions. 'Freedom is given' —and yet in practice, personal disposition, education, habit, and interests carry the day, whether in large, fateful decisions or in small, day-to-day ones."*<sup>4</sup>

So it turns out that change is not only a process, but a slow one, a process over time, in which we encounter not only our fears, but our entire personality, product both of our nature and our nurture, our genes and our upbringing.

Perhaps based on this deep awareness, is that Maimonides, the expert Jewish philosopher on teshuvah, gives three possible scenarios for change, recognizing that not everybody changes the same way, at the same time:

*"[Who has reached] complete Teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it...This is a complete Baal-Teshuvah, a complete penitent."* Then he (Maimonides) continues: *"If he does not repent until his old age, at a time when he is incapable of doing what he did before, even though this is not a high level of repentance, he is (still) a Baal-Teshuvah."* And then he concludes: *"Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven."*<sup>5</sup>

While some rabbis, like Rabbi Shalom Noach Berzovsky, holds that change must be radical, complete, and abrupt, most rabbis go for slow, gradual, and partial change.

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<sup>3</sup> Now is the Time for Turning. From: [Gates of Forgiveness](#). CCAR. 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe: [Alej Shur, vol. 1, pp. 155-156](#). Transl. Rabbi Shai Held, adapted.

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides' [Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah \(Laws of Repentance\) chapter 2:1](#)

No change is a product of a single sermon and overnight change is a beautiful theme for a movie or a song, but hardly for most real people. Life is not a home run. More likely it is a slow process from base to base, sometimes running, sometimes walking. Sometimes you make it all the way home, and sometimes you get stuck at third base.

How do we change?

Not heroically, over time, slowly, back and forth, one step at a time. Change is difficult! Yet, change does happen! For most of us, change is a process, not a one-time radical proposition. I can embrace this definition of change and hopefully you can too.

So what about "the sermon of your life," Manes?

You see, there is only one conceivable sermon of my life; the one in which I preach with my life rather than with my lips. As King David exclaimed:

אשירה לה' בחיי ...

"I will sing to Hashem with my life! (Psalms 104,33)

I like to invite all of you, all of us, to change in this coming year; to change not heroically but gradually, to change over time, to change slowly, to change one step at a time, but to change nevertheless.

אשירה לה' בחיי ...

"I will sing to Hashem with my life! (Psalms 104,33)

Let's sing to Hashem with our lives. Let's weave from our lives a beautiful song, worthy to be sung; a song made with our imperfect lives; lives that wish to be a little better, day by day.

Master of the Universe, God who desires change: Keep us away from the false dichotomy between everything or nothing.

Help us compose a beautiful song with our lives, a song woven with all the small changes we will make in this coming year, slowly, one step at a time.

And in your kindness, bless all of us and our loved ones with a year of courage and determination, with a year of peace and joy, with a good and sweet year.