

from the Rabbi's Desk
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Have a Good Year!

D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

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Ever notice that Jews don't traditionally wish each other a "happy new year"? Instead, we say the Hebrew phrase "shanah tovah" which — in spite of the mistaken translation that appears on almost all greeting cards — has no connection at all to the expression "have a happy new year."¹

Now, have you ever wondered why greeting card companies, like Hallmark, never print the literal translation of "shanah tovah," a good year? You might find, "Have a Happy New Year!", "A Healthy New Year!", "A Year filled with Happiness, Joy, and Peace!" but never the literal translation of "shanah tovah," a plain "good year."

I think the reason is because the word "good" is underrated!

I have a very close friend who lives in Buenos Aires. Each time I ask him how he's doing, he replies, "excellent!" or "great!" Personally, I never answer *excellent* or *great* when people ask how I'm doing. Maybe I don't want to jinx it, but mostly, I rarely feel *excellent* or *great*. My default answer is just "good." or "OK."

¹ <https://www.aish.com/jw/s/Jews-Dont-Say-Happy-New-Year.html>

Now, if someone asks how you are doing and you reply, "good" or "OK," they will most likely, always immediately, ask you, "what's wrong?" After all, if everybody's answer is *great* and your answer is just *good*, something must be wrong.

We learned from Andie Collier, the speaker at our past Collier breakfast, that social media sites have surpassed print newspapers as a news source for Americans. Most Americans, and I imagine most people around the world who have access to the Internet, not only learn their current events news from social media but learn of their *friends'* "news" as well. As I mentioned in a dvar Torah a couple of years ago, social media presents us with a distorted version of reality, one in which everybody seems to be doing great (if not, why post it at all?), and if everybody is doing great, then doing good is not good enough.

Yes, good is definitely underrated, and I suggest that if we want to have a good year we must uncover the true meaning of good.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: *good* is not bad. *OK* is not bad. There's nothing like having elderly parents to help you realize the meaning of *good*. When I ask my parents how they are doing and they tell me they are doing *good*, I am truly filled with a sense of appreciation; because when it comes to my elderly parents, I don't take good for granted.

Now let me say it clearly: in our world, we should never take good for granted, and not only when it comes to elderly parents. Anyone who has had a sick child, who overcame a serious illness, who has gotten a job after being unemployed for a while, knows that good is not only not bad; good is really good, even if it doesn't help Hallmark sell cards.

Let me take it one step further: if we say that good is underrated, we can also say that happiness is overrated.

A couple of years ago, *The Atlantic* published a fascinating article titled, *There's More to Life than Being Happy*. The author, Emily Esfahani Smith, shares how researchers are cautioning against the pursuit of mere happiness. These researchers found "that a meaningful life and a happy life overlap in certain ways, but are ultimately very different. Leading a happy life, the

researchers found, is associated with being a 'taker,' while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a 'giver.' Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided," the author writes.²

In that article, the author quotes Holocaust survivor and world-renowned psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, "To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy'. But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to be happy."³

Frankl finds the reason to be happy is in living a meaningful life.

Emily Esfahani Smith, in this same article, quotes a study in which "psychological scientists asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they thought their lives were meaningful and/or happy. [After] examining their self-reported attitudes toward meaning, happiness, and many other variables," the researchers explored "How do the happy life and the meaningful life differ? Happiness, they found, is about feeling good...The happy life is also defined by a lack of stress or worry." Also, "Happy people get a lot of joy from receiving benefits from others while people leading meaningful lives get a lot of joy from giving to others."⁴

Now, you may be nodding at what I am saying (after all, it's easy to agree in principle with Viktor Frankl), and yet you may be asking yourself, how would a "shanah tovah," a good year, look? How can we translate "good" into tangible steps, concrete actions, and doable resolutions?

So without further ado, here are Rabbi Kogan's 10 suggestions for a good year (and remember, these are all firstly suggestions for myself):

² <https://www.aish.com/jw/s/Jews-Dont-Say-Happy-New-Year.html>

³ *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl. Beacon Press, 1992. Page 140.

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>

1) Make this year a year of doing good. Paraphrasing Viktor Frankl: Stop being a taker and become a giver! There is so much suffering out there, and when I say "out there" I don't mean only in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also "out here," around the corner, in our own shul. Each of us can make a difference. We can extend a hand, bring comfort, be present for others, and by doing good, we will encounter meaning, as Viktor Frankl promises us.

2) Make this a year of good friends and meaningful connections. Instead of investing hours and hours into your 2348 Facebook friends, put a little more time and purposeful effort into developing deeper connections with two or three true friends, friends who will be there for you unconditionally, when you need them, the same way you will be there for them when they need you. Last week, my brother in Argentina had surgery on his fractured leg. I called to check on him after the surgery and one of his childhood friends picked up the phone. He told me that he and other friends were taking turns to stay by my brother's bedside. This is the kind of friendship we should all work on developing this year.

3) Make this year a year of becoming good at something. Learn something new and show yourself and others that it is never too late to learn. Learn bonsai, woodworking, knitting, chess, creative writing. Put effort and time in what you wish to master and you will see the results. Believe me, there is a wonderful sight when you see the ball describing a perfect arch and landing close to the pin and you say to yourself, "I did it! All these hours of practicing in the backyard are paying off."

4) Be a good child, a good parent, a good sibling, a good spouse. Paraphrasing the saying: goodness begins at home. If you claim your family is your priority, put your time where your mouth is. Call them and visit them as often as you can. Be the one who initiates the communication and don't worry if you feel it isn't being reciprocated. Eventually it will. You will see.

5) Be good to yourself! Make this year a healthy one! You won't be able to do good and to help others if you are sick. While the ultimate key of health is in God's hands (hence our prayers), there are two health-related goals entirely in our hands: healthy eating and exercising! I know I have said it

before, but it still holds true. Having a healthy year is in our own hands as well.

6) Be a good listener. Listen more and talk less. While the Sages teach us that there are many reasons for sounding the shofar, the simplest one is to teach us to be better listeners. At this point, I like to recommend to you the book "*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*," by Susan Cain. The author reminds us that when it comes to talking, less is more.

7) Be a good Jew! You don't have to be the best Jew, or a Super Jew. Just be a good one which, by looking at where all of us are, means more Torah study, more Mitzvot, and more Israel in your life! You see, when it comes to Judaism, especially nowadays, less is not more, but actually more is more. Hillcrest gives all of us a menu of opportunities to connect with Torah and mitzvot. But if you don't find one that fits your needs within the walls of our shul, I say to you, "find it out there!" Jewish life is bigger than a single shul. Never in our Jewish history, have we had so many opportunities to study Torah as we have today. Almost every single traditional Jewish book has been translated into English, there are excellent Jewish websites with plenty of learning opportunities, and so many great teachers out there. We are not in Roanoke, VA. We are in New York City. If you want to learn more, practice more, connect more, I will help you find the way. The best way to combat anti-Judaism, is, believe it or not, Judaism! This is how I fight BDS. I fight boycott with presence, divestment with investment, and sanctions with love and involvement!

8) Think Good and it will be good!⁵ Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789–1866), the third Lubavitcher Rebbe known as the Tzemach Tzedek taught: "*Tracht gut, vet zein gut*" — "Think good, and it will be good." That means, the mere exercise of thinking positively produces positive results. By thinking positively, I don't mean that we should see everything rosy, or ignore the fact that there is suffering in the world, but we *should* work on an optimistic outlook, and instill in our children, grandchildren, and students the belief that the world is a good place and that most people they will

⁵ I want to thank Ilan Kogan for bringing this teaching to my attention.

encounter, are good people. It means also thinking good about others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, and seeing the best in them. Easier said than done, Manes, but not impossible.

9) Good starts small. Accustom yourself to hold the door for other people, say "please" and "thank you" many times during the day. Knock on the door before you make your entrance, rush to say, "I'm sorry" if you did something wrong or if someone got hurt because of you, and be forgiving. Life is too short to hold grudges. When you hold a grudge, you don't punish anybody but yourself.

10) Believe in goodness. Goodness exists and there are many good people around. Most people are actually good people. See the goodness around you and celebrate that goodness. Say to yourself: It is good that such special wonderful people surround me. I do not want to make anybody here blush by mentioning names, but look around and see how many good people we have here in our own shul. Seek their company and join their ranks. We can all climb the ladder of goodness in this coming year. Above all, believe God is good. When in doubt, give God the benefit of the doubt, judge Him favorably, and hope that He, in turn, will give you the benefit of the doubt and judge you favorably.

I hope I was able to convince you how good, *good* can be, and more importantly, how to live goodly, think goodly, feel goodly, and act goodly.

Will I have a happy year? Will I pop confetti and have lots of fun? Will I have the best year ever? I am not sure! However, one thing I can tell you is that I will settle, any day, for a meaningful and good year.

Usually I end my divrei Torah with many words of blessings. Let me end this one with a simple wish for all of you, for all of us. May Hashem bless all of us and our loved ones with a *shannah tovah, with a good year!*