

REINVENTION SERMON
ROSH HASHANA EVE, 5776
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

"In the afterlife you are judged not against other people, but against yourself. Specifically, you are judged against what you could have been. So the afterword is much like the present world, but it now includes all the yous that you could have been. In an elevator you might meet more successful versions of yourself...But soon you fall victim to intimidation. These yous are not really you, they are better than you. They made smarter choices, worked harder, invested the extra effort into pushing on closed doors. These doors eventually broke open for them and allowed their lives to splash out in colorful new directions...

In their parallel lives, they made better decisions, avoided moral lapses, did not give up on love so easily. They worked harder than you did to correct their mistakes and apologized more often. Eventually you cannot stand hanging around these better yous. You discover you've never felt more competitive with anyone in your life."

This fanciful story is from David Eagleman's book, *Sum*. It echoes a well-known Hassidic story. Once Rabbi Zusya came to his students crying.

"Zusya, what's the matter?" they asked. He responded:

"I learned what question God will ask me when I die."

"But Zusya," they said, "you are pious.

You are a scholar and you are humble.

You have helped so many people. What question about your life could be so terrifying?" Zusya replied: "God will not ask me, Why were you not more like Abraham? Nor will God ask me, Why were you not more like Moses?

God will ask me, Why were you not more like Zusya?"

Both these stories emphasize how important it is to try and be our best selves. Rosh Hashana is a perfect time to contemplate how we might go about reaching for those personal goals that have eluded us until now. After all, Rosh Hashana is described in our liturgy

as the day the world was created¹. As we celebrate the creation of the world, why not give ourselves the opportunity for renewal, recreation, and reinvention. Of course, this is a tall order. It is difficult to get out of our comfort zone. We may not feel particularly fulfilled in the work we do, some of our relationships may feel stale, we may still have not signed up for that wonderful class we have promised ourselves to take – but our routines, as boring as they may be or as unexciting as they may have become, are familiar to us. Why rock the boat or fix what ain't broken? Change is hard. So I would like to propose some ways that we might jog the mind, shake us out of our lethargy, rekindle some of that fire we once had. We might begin with the call of the shofar which is meant to awaken us. This year's new High Holy Day prayer book gives us three separate occasions to heed its cry, as you will discover tomorrow. So too, confessing our sins throughout the 10 Days of Awe helps to cleanse us, offering us the possibility of a clean slate from which to restart the year.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro suggests that we think of Rosh Hashanah as Head Changing Day. After all, "rosh" does mean "head." He says: "You can't have a new year with an old head. So if you want a new year, you are going to need to get a new head. A new head is a story-free head. Your stories define you. If your stories are positive and loving, then you are optimistic and loving. If your stories are negative and fearful, then you are angry and afraid... If you want a new head, identify the stories you carry with you. Ask yourself: 'Am I absolutely certain this story is true?' 'How does telling this story make me feel?'"

In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Eliezer offers another approach: He tells us we should repent the day before we die. Of course, we don't know what day that will be. So we must live every day as though it were our last. If this were your last day, what would you feel the need to do? If this were your last conversation with your spouse, your friend, your child,

¹ Erica Brown, *Spiritual Boredom*, p. 163.

is this how you would want to conduct it?
What changes do you need to make in order to be
the person you would like to be?

Saul Kaplan, the Founder and Chief Catalyst of the Business Innovation Factory, gives us some very practical advice about steps we might take to push ourselves beyond our habitual mindset and behavior. He tells us: "Reinvention is a journey, not a destination.

It doesn't have to be a scary word...

It's about personal R&D to explore and test new possibilities.

It's about experimenting all the time to uncover latent opportunities.

It's about continuing to strengthen our current selves while simultaneously working on our future selves by actively engaging in new ideas, environments, and practices. You don't have to stop doing what you're currently doing;

you just have to allow yourself the freedom to **try more stuff.**"²

And here is some of the "stuff" Kaplan suggests:

- 1.** Hang out in places where more collisions with unusual suspects are likely to happen. Stop hanging with usual suspects!
- 2.** Create a list of new stuff you've always wanted to try or be able to do. Start working the list today.
- 4.** Attend events you wouldn't normally go to, and really listen and engage.
- 5.** Commit to learning something new every day.
- 7.** Have coffee with someone completely new every week. Someone who has a different point of view and experience from your own.
- 8.** Read books and articles from genres you never read. Expand your vocabulary. Stretch your interests.
- 9.** Try new foods. Order something on the menu you've never had before.
- 10.** Go listen to talks on subjects you know nothing about. Ask naïve questions.
- 11.** Audit a class in a surprising subject area, the more experiential the better.
- 13.** Travel to places you haven't been before and really experience the community. Avoid being a tourist!

² This post originally appeared on [Medium.com](https://medium.com)

14. Volunteer on the opposite side of town from where you live.

15. Explore art if you're a scientist.

Explore science if you're an artist.

Explore both if you're in business!"

In conclusion? "What are we waiting for? Try more stuff."

Eleanor Roosevelt, adds:

"Do something that scares you."³

In her book, *Spiritual Boredom*, Erica Brown also recommends the Harvard School of Education's "Project Zero" exercises which are meant to stretch the limits of our thinking process.

For example, "ten times two" asks you to look at something, a painting, say, and identify ten things you notice.

Then you need to find 10 more.

She says that, "You'll find that this exercise feels torturous until the moment it feels wonderful.

Wonder requires digging deeper, seeing more, and expanding the way we think."⁴

In order to begin our New Year with a new mindset, with a changed head, I thought we might try a few of the Project Zero exercises.

We'll do a modified version of 10 times 10.

IMAGE #1 (Maine Family):

Look at the image quietly

for at least 30 seconds. Let your eyes wander.

List 5 words or phrases about any aspect of the picture.

Repeat and try to add 5 more words or phrases to your list.

³ From Eric Brown's, *Spiritual Boredom*,

⁴ P. 158.



(Next exercise).

IMAGE #2 (Egypt): What do you think you know about this artwork or topic?
What questions or puzzles do you have?
What does the topic or artwork make you want to explore?



(Next exercise.)

Image #3 (Mistress with Former Slaves):
Choose one of the following 3 questions:
If this artwork is the **beginning** of the story,

what might happen next?

If this artwork is the **middle** of the story,
what might have happened before?

What might be about to happen?

If this artwork is the **end** of the story, what might the story be?



These exercises are meant to expand your powers of observation, pushing you beyond first impressions. They encourage you to use your imagination, to look for connections and patterns. They stimulate curiosity. I hope they will also encourage you to continue this kind of probing out in your world.

Cantor Ellen Dreskin tells us that “[w]e are God’s song in the world. [Now] is the time to focus and question: What Godsong will be heard through my life in the coming year?...Were it not for the breath of God blowing through me, I would make no sound at all.

[Now] is the time to tune up, sharpen our skills, and be a song that is worthy of being heard.”

The mystics of our tradition liken “each of us to a shofar.”

“The shofar is narrow at the beginning and wide at the end.

May we remember to begin with ourselves,
and then open our hearts and our ears and our eyes
to understand that we too can be bigger – we can be wider –
and our smallest actions can make a huge difference
in the world.”⁵

Becoming our best selves, making full use of
the talents we have been given, living up to
the highest standards in our relations with other people –
these are the ways we bring holiness into the world.
Then our very lives become praises of the One Who
gave us life, of the Eternal God – and our souls
will be singing Hallelujah.

To page 135 – Hallelujah.

⁵ Jewels of Elul, 2015.