

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2022  
Rav Hazzan Ken Richmond  
Temple Israel of Natick  
Shana Tova & Shehecheyanu

*Shana tova.*

This is my first High Holiday sermon. I've given many divrei Torah on Shabbat, but this is my first High Holiday sermon. I've been trying to figure out how long it should be, how good it should be, and most importantly, how long I should procrastinate.

Almost exactly a week ago, I posted on Facebook that I had been working on my sermon for hours and had gotten as far as writing, "*Shana Tova*." A few of you suggested topics I might cover, and a pretty large number of you thought I should stop right there while I was ahead. Some of you just thought that there's nothing wrong with short and sweet-- in the style of Teddy Mann, who was the wildly popular mayor of Newton when I was growing up, and would often get up at events and say, "My friends, I make short speeches. Thank you!"-- and then sit down. And some of you, including my friend Rebbe Yossi Lipsker of Swampscott, thought that the words *Shana Tova* should encapsulate any message I might wish to share, and actually, if I had to summarize this *dvar Torah* in two words, "*Shana Tova*" would do pretty well.

But for better or for worse, I'm going to give you the longer version. I'll begin with a story that I've had in mind for years to share with you one day on the High Holidays, which is the story of when I went cliff diving.

I was bicycling across the country after graduating college, and we were heading through the Ozarks, which as you may know, if you've watched the

Netflix series by that name, can be a beautiful but foreboding place. We stopped at Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park-- named for the way the rocks shut in the river, which in turn has formed the rocks into a natural water park. After a refreshing swim among the pools and waterfalls, I joined some of my fellow cyclists, who had clambered up past the "Danger" signs and formed a line with the locals, to jump off one of the cliffs into the water dozens of feet below. I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm afraid of heights, but I wouldn't say I'm fond of them either. I became increasingly nervous as I approached the front of the line and realized that one had to jump forward off the cliff to avoid crashing into the rocks directly below. I strongly considered turning back, but told myself "You only live once!" As I steeled my nerves to leap, my wet foot slipped off the edge, and I found myself hurtling down, with scarcely a moment to come to terms with my imminent demise. I plunged into the water, narrowly avoiding rocks behind me and on either side. I emerged, screaming, "I'm alive! I'm still alive!"

Besides the simplest lesson I've taken from this story, which is to avoid cliff diving, I'd like to unpack the story this Rosh Hashanah through the lens of a familiar blessing-- the *shehecheyanu*, in which we thank God for giving us life, sustaining us, and for helping us reach an occasion, a moment in time.

We say the *shehecheyanu* blessing on reaching an annual holiday-- when we light candles for the first night of Hanukkah, make kiddush on the first evenings of festivals, shake the lulav for the first time on Sukkot. We say the blessing when we buy or first use a new car, or new clothes, or when we first taste fresh blueberries in the summer. We say it for the birth of a child. And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says in the Talmud (Berachot 58b) to recite this blessing when we see a friend that we have not seen in over 30 days, that we should rekindle a relationship with this blessing of gratitude and revival.

Let's examine the three verbs of the *shehecheyanu* blessing, starting with the first one, *shehecheyanu*, "who caused us to be alive." (The verb contains "*chai*," or life, at its center.) When I think of the *shehecheyanu* blessing, I sometimes stop at this first verb and just marvel. How infinitesimal are the odds that any of us would come into being!

My parents met on a blind date on a snowy evening one winter, when both of them were home from college, on a night when each of them was supposed to have a blind date with someone else, who canceled due to the weather. So I owe my existence to New England winters. And my parents' parents and grandparents wouldn't have met if they hadn't all emigrated from different countries in Eastern Europe at just the right times. For each of us, a series of increasingly improbable events going back to the beginning of humankind had to occur with perfect choreography in order to lead to our births, to our being made in the Divine image.

I recently attended a class with Rabbi Shai Held entitled "Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity." He shared Maimonides' teaching that the world is a Divine gift, pure grace, something we couldn't expect, and can never repay, and he added that our own lives are a gift within this gift. Today's Torah and Haftarah portions highlight this notion that life is a gift, precious and precarious. We read of Sarah and Hannah's infertility, and later, their miraculous pregnancies, that lead to the births of Isaac and Samuel. These births seem especially wondrous, coming as they do after years of yearning, but also remind us that any birth, any life is miraculous.

Let's turn now to the next verb, *V'kiy'manu*-- for sustaining us, for supporting us, for holding us up. Not only is our coming into existence a gift and a miracle, but so is our remaining so. The difficult Torah portions for this holiday deal with people in great danger, often caused by those who should be protecting them. We heard today about the near-deaths of

Ishmael and Hagar in the desert, and tomorrow, we'll read about the near-death of Isaac on the mountain. But we shouldn't need these frightening stories, nor experiences like mine with cliff-diving, in order to appreciate the ongoing miracle of our existence.

Our liturgy expresses this explicitly. We begin each day by saying *Modeh Ani* (*Modah Ani/Modim Anachnu*), thanking God for lovingly restoring our souls to our bodies as we awake. In the blessings leading up to the Shema we say, *Uvtuvo m'chadesh b'chol yom tamid maasei vreisheet*

In God's goodness, God renews each day, constantly, the act of creation. Chaim of Volozhin, a rabbi from 18th century Poland, focuses on the word *tamid*, constantly, and the present tense of *m'chadesh*, God renews, and explains that God does so not only each day, but at every instant and moment.<sup>1</sup>

Or as the poet Hillel Zeitlin wrote, addressing God in his poem "Anew":

You create Your world, your children, every instant  
Withdraw your guiding grace for the blink of an eye and all things  
return to nothingness.  
Instead, you pour blessings upon us each and every moment.

Being grateful for the journey, or throughout the journey, may be the hardest of the three steps of the *shehecheyanu* blessing, especially given all the challenges we face. Many of us in our congregation, many of our loved ones, have had health challenges in the past year: we've had cancer, heart attacks, strokes, short and long COVID, addiction, mental illness, and memory loss. And that's just a partial list. And we face serious problems in the world: inequality, bigotry, poverty, violence and war, wildfires and rising sea levels, anti-semitism and anti-Israel sentiments, and restrictions on individual rights. And that's also a nonexhaustive list. These challenges,

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my colleagues and teachers from Hebrew College for ideas on this topic including Rabbis Julia Appel, Rachel Tali Kaplan, Eliana Jacobowitz, Heather Renetzky, and Sharon Cohen Anisfeld.

from the personal to the global, underscore the fragility and preciousness of life, and highlight how important it is that we make the most of our time here on earth, and how imperative it is that we take care of each other.

The *Untaneh Tokef* prayer teaches us that there are many aspects of our lives that we can't control, especially matters of sickness and health, of life and death. But, as the prayer emphasizes, we can control our actions, and through *teshuva*, *tefilah*, and *tsedaka*, improving our relationships, cultivating a spiritual or religious life, and being generous and standing up for what we think is right, we can make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. When we infuse our days with the practice of gratitude despite the challenges we face, our lives feel more purposeful, and we can better help to sustain others.

And this brings us to the final verb of the *shehecheyanu* blessing, *v'higianu*, *v'higianu lazaman hazeh*. To cause us to reach this time, or literally "to cause us to touch this moment." While the first verb, *shehecheyanu*, covered the distant past, and the second verb, *v'kiy'manu*, the journey, this third verb, *v'higianu*, hones in on the present, causing us to appreciate this moment, before turning to the future.

We encounter this same sense of the present looking towards the future in the Rosh Hashanah *amidah*, when we say three times: *Hayom harat olam--* today the world is born or reborn, or alternatively, today the world is conceived anew, today the world enters a pregnant state, full of new possibilities and potentialities. We say these words directly after the blasts of the shofar, blasts meant to jolt us, to invite us to scrutinize our lives and our society, and inspire us to take action.

In his book, “Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace,” Croatian Theologian Miroslav Wolf<sup>2</sup> writes:

“God gives so that we can exist and flourish, but not only for that.  
God gives so that we can help others exist and flourish as well.  
God’s gifts aim at making us generous givers, not just fortunate receivers.  
God gives so that we, in human measure, can be givers too (p. 47).”

To apply this thought to the *shehecheyanu* blessing: we appreciate the miracle of our lives and continued existence, savor the moment we’re in, and then think about how we can pay it forward, how we can take the gifts we have been given and pass them on to others. And that’s how I’ve viewed my cliff diving episode in retrospect-- and I’m sure many of you have had events that affected you similarly-- as a chance to take stock of our lives, appreciate what we may have taken for granted, and figure out how best to use the gifts of our lives--the gifts of our strengths, our time, and our energy.

My friends, I think this is a *shehecheyanu* moment for this congregation.

*Shehecheyanu*: I’m grateful for those who founded this congregation as a start-up, a small gathering of local Jews in 1944.

*V’kiy’manu*: I’m grateful for all the energy and love that’s gone into building and sustaining this community for the past 78 years.

*V’higianu*: I’m grateful to have reached this holiday and this moment in our congregation’s history with all of you.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Shai Held for bringing my attention to this writer and quote

I'm grateful to be standing here this year as your co-senior rabbi, along with my friend and colleague, Rabbi Raysh Weiss. I'm grateful for many new beginnings-- a new Jewish year, a new school year, a new model and era of rabbinic leadership for TI, and a renewed opportunity to work together to preserve what is best about our temple's traditions and culture and to think creatively and dream together about our future.

My colleague Rabbi Lev Friedman teaches that if we were living in full consciousness, we would recite the *shehecheyanu* blessing every second. This seems like it might get a little tiring--and it might make it hard to get anything else done-- but I agree with his sentiment.

In that vein, I'd like to conclude by inviting you to join me in saying the *shehecheyanu* blessing, thanking God for the gift of being here together at this moment in this holy community.

*Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higi'anu lazman hazeh.*

Thank you, Adonai our God, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for bringing us to this moment together.

We can't recite this blessing every second, but may we do our best to live our lives from day to day with gratitude for our manifold gifts and blessings, and may we rededicate ourselves this year to sharing these blessings with our loved ones, with this holy community, with the people and land of Israel, and with the world. Amen.

*Shana Tova.*