

# ROSH HASHANAH: BEGINNING OUR JOURNEY OF CHANGE

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A hospital visit from the rabbi: the woman's accent gave away her un-American origins. Asking her where she came from, she replied Poland, and that she had migrated here after the Second World War. On further enquiring about where in Poland she was born, she smiled at me wryly, or seriously, (to this day I do not know) and said: "I was born in the town of *Chelm* – have you heard of it?"

For those of you who giggled, your laughter mimicked the smile that I stifled inside. For any lover of Jewish folk-lore has heard of the town of Chelm! It is a town full of wise idiots, whose jester-like antics reoccur often in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century books of Jewish humor. Chelm, that village of "extremely silly" is where Mendel, a lazy man with his head a little "*famished*" resided.

Mendel had never been beyond the boundaries of Chelm, and yearned to see the world. For Mendel, in his tiny village, the world meant: the big city – Warsaw – where everything was sophisticated, all were well-off, and the living was easy. So Mendel decides to walk to Chelm, the city of his curiosity and dreams. It is quite a distance from Chelm to Warsaw, so on his way, Mendel needs to nap overnight. Not wanting to forget which direction he was heading in, he points his shoes along the road in the direction of Warsaw, so in the morning, he will know which way to continue.

During the night, a would-be thief comes upon the sleeping Mendel, a bundle of clothes wrapped under his head; snoring his head off. No bag or money lying on the ground, the only thing that appeared to the thief that might have any value are his shoes, pointing... in the direction of Warsaw. He picked them up to examine them, and saw on closer inspection, that they were old, the leather worn, heels needing replacing, and by the right big toe, surely: the beginning of a hole.

The thief placed the shoes back down on the ground and continues on his way. However... now the shoes no longer point towards Warsaw... but rather back in the direction of Chelm. Mendel wakes up the next morning, puts the shoes on his feet, and begins to walk the road again. Soon he approaches civilization.

And Mendel, the fool, believing he has arrived in Warsaw, is amazed to find things exactly as they were in Chelm! The houses look familiar; the synagogue is of the same design; the people's faces look like replicas of folks he knows, right down to the "twin" of his wife. He decides that "if one place is exactly like every other place, one might as well... just stay put."

Like Mendel, some of us yearn, some of us even act, to embark on journeys believing that beyond our personal world there is something more, something deeper, something more profound than the life we currently live. We yearn for the journey towards better, self improvement, realization, enlightenment, towards...

Perhaps that is why Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat Pray Love* struck such a popular chord, elevating it to the bestseller's lists and to the popular just recently released film starring Julia Roberts. It chronicles such a classical personal journey that many of us in our heart-of-hearts yearn to take into the discovery of self. And here we are at the time of such change. Rosh HaShanah -- Often translated as the head or of the year -- but Rosh HaShanah can be translated other: *rosh* means beginning, and *shanah* means change. Our New Year is the time of the beginning of change.

A postcard from the movie *Eat Pray Love*: Elizabeth still married to her soon-to-be-former husband, is at a party, and accompanies a friend upstairs to change her baby's diaper. She asks how her friend knew she was ready to have a child? Urging Elizabeth not to laugh, the friend speaks of a box she kept under her bed with a collection of baby clothes for the child she desired to have one day. It was a path she always knew she wanted to take. And then in a direct, starkly-put line she says to Elizabeth: "Having a baby is like getting a tattoo on your face. You really need to be certain it's what you want before you commit."

Elizabeth then considers a similar box that she also keeps under her own bed. A box of pamphlets and articles about places she wants to travel and explore in depth. She resolves to take a different journey – without her husband with whom she has been living an existence of misery; and without the life-plan they had laid out together that she realizes she no longer wants to follow. Elizabeth, newly divorced, embarks on a journey through Italy, India and Indonesia. All places, she ironically notes, that begin with the letter "I". On that journey, she not only travels the world, but travels into herself – exploring her connection to pleasure and re-finding herself in Italy; her connection to prayer and getting in touch with the Holy

One in India, and her connection to others and to balance through realization of self in Indonesia. Hence the title: *Eat Pray Love*.

Some of us believe that perhaps the answer to life's meanings is out there, elsewhere, in a different place. When I first moved to America, and was experiencing every American illness I had not contracted as a child; had just broken up with my year-long beau; as well as finding the cultural adjustment a bit of a challenge in conservative Cincinnati -- one of my classmates gave me a copy of Judith Viorst's classic children's tale *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Alexander's constant refrain at things going wrong is: "I think I will move to Australia!"

Things often seem like they might be better somewhere else or if the circumstances were changed and different. We would be happier if we were in a different job; or if we lived in a sunnier climate; or if we could just take off and escape for a while on a desert isle or in the big city. We would be more contented if we were single; or if we were married. We would feel better about ourselves if had we the "right" clothes; or were thinner; or more athletic. However these parts of our life journey are the externals. Even Alexander at the end of his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, gets that things are not always made better by external circumstances. He shares with us his mother's wisdom:

"It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

My mom says some days are like that.

Even in Australia."

While we think like Mendel that the journey is to Warsaw, a city where the streets are paved with gold, our journey if we want change, is in fact back to Chelm, to ourselves where transformation really occurs. Ultimately, an external journey, while it might bring fresh perspective, is not a journey of change. It is a journey of escape and we still must undergo the internal journey for the beginning of change, for Rosh HaShanah to occur.

Elizabeth Gilbert's book, now a movie, would not be as compelling a travel tale if it was just a journal of the things that she saw in Italy, India and Indonesia -- if it was just about the external experience! What makes it a best-seller is that it is a humor-filled chronicle of her own internal journey, her own wrestling, it journals how she changes as a person through

learning from her experiences and being open to the lessons that life has to teach.

This High Holy Days we sing the words of Shlomo Carlbach...  
“Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul... return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are... born and reborn and reborn...” We are embarking on an inner contemplative journey. As our *Machzor*, our High Holy Day prayerbook articulates: ” This is the hour of change...”

We will meditate where we have gone right, we will assess where we have gone wrong, we will resolve to improve and to transform our lives. *Teshuvah* means more than repentance, it means returning to the place where we began, to start anew for the better. At Rosh HaShanah we (if you can metaphorically imagine it) alongside God begin the writing of this internal journey, at Yom Kippur, the Day of At-One-Ment, we alongside God (if you can metaphorically imagine it) will seal this internal journey of change, and set it on course for the year ahead.

Tomorrow we will experience the Shofar calls by our wonderful CHAVTY Shofar Choir taught ably by Sheri Kay. The sounds of the shofar, we are taught, are traditionally a wake-up call to change. It is designed to arouse and motivate us to action. The notes emitted from the Shofar pierce to reach out hearts. They are made up of a series of blasts carefully designed to mimic our inner search. The mystics teach us:

Tekiah. A short sound calls us to attention.

Te-ru-ah. Three short blasts reminding us of the brokenness that is in our life.

She-va-rim-rim-rim-rim-rim-rim-rim. Nine quick disjointed blasts remind us that we have the ability step by step to deal with the places our lives have gone awry.

TekiahGedolah..... A long clear note lets us know that we have the ability in our breath and soul to bring our lives back together.

Our *Kaddish* this evening was introduced by Alvin Fine’s poem: Birth is a beginning, and death a destination.” He writes moving words that tell us

“... looking backward or ahead

We see that victory lies  
Not at some high place along the way,  
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,  
A sacred pilgrimage.”

To make our pilgrimage sacred, meaningful, transformative we must commence and be mindful of our inner journey. What better place to start than this year 5771, at Rosh HaShanah? At the time of the beginning of change.

We will use the rubric of *Eat, Pray, Love* as our guide and inspiration over the services ahead.

“Eat”: Tomorrow we will explore the essential us and move towards the essence of self.

“Pray”: Kol Nidre we will consider prayer, our lives of spirit, our connection to the Holy One of Blessing.

“Love”: And Yom Kippur morning we will contemplate our relationship to others and the finding of balance.

Let us together embark on an inner journey, a heart journey, a journey to understanding of self, returning us to where we started, returning us to the land of our soul, who we are, what we are, born and reborn and reborn...