

A New Year's Upgrade
Rosh HaShanah 5773
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Shana Tova! Happy New Year! Thanks to the sponsor of the holiday, Apple, we are proud to announce the release of the new iPhone 5773. Building on the strengths of previous versions this upgrade will feature faster speeds, a thinner body and more features. Apple may not be sponsoring these services but it reminds us that the essential goal of Rosh HaShanah is upgrading our lives to a new and better you and me, version 5773.

On the iPhone, we can ask Siri, the computer generated voice, "Where am I?" and she will answer with longitudinal coordinates, a place name or by pulling up a GPS-located street map. In the Torah's Garden of Eden, G-d calls out to Adam and Eve, "Ayeka, Where are you?" Unlike our question to Siri, God's words are not a question of physical location, rather spiritual direction. In the Torah story, Adam and Eve are silent and do not respond. After eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve attempt to hide in the garden. They are uncomfortable, too ashamed of their one misdeed that it overshadows all their other good done and severs their connection with G-d. With G-d's question, "Ayeka, Where are you?," G-d asks, "Now that you have made a small mistake what will you do? Will you learn and grow from it? Will you change and repair that misdeed? Are you challenging yourself to grow and learn and what are you doing to help the needs of others in the world?"

Rosh Hashana is our time to reflect on where we have come from this past year, to acknowledge our path and to install our new upgrade beginning our journey in 5773. Today, we hear that same challenge from the shofar, in our Machzor and in our own soul, "Ayekah, Where are you?"

We do not use the iPhone 5, Siri, or a GPS device to plot our coordinates on the grid of life. There are parents who have their children stand next to the kitchen door frame, take a pencil and make a mark noting their height, name and the date. Every year the marks fill up the door frame going higher as the children grow bigger and bigger. It is easy to see one's physical growth pattern, however our lives and souls are more difficult to chart. How do we mark our spiritual growth each year? How do we ensure that our life is expanding and deepening, stretching to new heights?

In the town of Chelm, there was a disagreement about how people grow. One person was convinced that people grow from the ground up, while the other was just as sure that we grow from the head down. Yankel said, "Just look at the marching band as it passes by. None of the heads of the band members is at the same height, but they all have their feet on the ground. That is proof that people grow from the ground up." Shlomo argued that the pants of their uniforms don't all reach their shoes. Some of the pants are a little long, and some are a little short. That, he argues, surely indicates that people grow from the head down. Since the two could not resolve their disagreement, they went to the rabbi. Each man presented his belief about the

method by which human beings grow. The rabbi listened to each and finally said, “My fair gentleman, it is not that human beings grow from the top down or from the bottom up. The truth is that we grow from the inside out. It is what inspires us that makes us grow. When we study and open up our mind, when we do good deeds and open up our heart, when we follow our kishkes- that is how we grow.”

The treif (non-kosher) lobster offers us a second answer to the question of how we can measure our growth. Though I have never tasted one and I advise you as your rabbi to never eat one, a lobster is one of God’s creations and therefore has a purpose in our world. Maybe one reason for its existence is to instruct us how to live a meaningful life and keep pushing ourselves to be better. Rabbi Abraham Twerski, in *Happiness and the Human Spirit: The Spirituality of Becoming the Best You Can Be*, teaches how a lobster grows. They are crusty crustaceans, encased in inflexible shells that cannot expand. When a lobster’s shell is too confining and oppressive, it sheds its shell and is left exposed and vulnerable. As the lobster stretches, it grows a new larger, more spacious casing. That new shell will eventually become too tight and it will repeat the process of expanding, shedding and making a new larger shell. The signal for the lobster that it has grown and it is time to shed its shell is discomfort. To grow spiritually requires two things: strengthening and reinforcing one’s positive character traits and acknowledging and reducing one’s negative ones. “Ayeka, Where are you?” Don’t eat the lobster, be the lobster- shed your shell and be the person you want to be.

Rabbi Moshe Rosenstein teaches that the process of teshuvah, repentance and seeking forgiveness, enables us to see ourselves and our life with clarity; to recreate ourselves in a better way as our defects disappear. To achieve this goal, we must pull together all the positive forces and strengths in us, using our best talents and recognizing our self-worth. We must be determined and stubborn in our effort to reduce our faults. With patience, compassion and inner-strength, we can bolster the good qualities that make us who we are.

One of the most compelling stories in baseball is that of New York Met’s pitcher R.A. Dickey known for his unhittable knuckleball, which is considered the lowliest pitch, a last resort. Baseball covets flame-throwers on the mound who strike fear with their fastballs like legends Bob Feller, Sandy Koufax and Nolan Ryan. Dickey was a teenage pitching phenom throwing in the 90s and making swiss cheese of opposing batters. The problem was that as he made his way through the minor leagues, his speed started to slow and unhittable balls started to be hit. He lost confidence and was stuck in the minors. After many years of waiting for the call to the majors, he was given the choice to learn to throw the knuckleball, the garbage pitch, or to say goodbye to professional baseball. In his words, Dickey wrote, “I was tired of being average and wanted to be more.” Broken and stuck, he decided wholeheartedly to change his throwing motion for the knuckler. Year after year, throwing thousands and thousands of knuckleballs, Dickey finally perfected the pitch. Every time, the pitcher’s motion must be exactly the same, and if so, a knuckleball never rotates. After 12 years of perfecting the knuckleball in the minors, R.A.

Dickey, a man who battled much in his life as recounted in his autobiography *Wherever I Wind-up*, is the arguably the best pitcher in baseball.

There is a saying, “When you want something you’ve never had, you have to do something you’ve never done.” Today is a time to focus on opportunities for change and growth, to upgrade to our new version and slip out of our old shell or pick up a new pitch. Like the lobster, we may feel some discomfort and the process may leave us vulnerable, but no risk is without its reward. Like the pitcher, we will have to work hard to perfect our delivery. Today’s shofar challenges us to grow, take a deep breath and reach for higher levels following the upwards bend of the ram’s horn.

The pattern of the 100 shofar notes call out to us, “Ayeka, Where are you and where are you going?” They begin unbroken with a full tekiah and then shatter first into the sighing of the shevarim and then piercing staccato teruah. Finally, there is a whole note that is longer and greater than the original. The shofar notes announce our path on the growth chart of life. Throughout the year, we must break the walls and chains that confine us and gather the fragments of our lives to continue the journey of growth. The Hebrew word for grow is “*Legadel*” which also means big and great for the great Tekiah, Tekiah gedola. The shofar inspires us to upgrade and improve.

The S’fat Emet teaches that Rosh HaShana is a day for complete renewal or upgrading, *zeh hayom le’mitchadesh*. In order to strengthen our positive qualities, our guide for a three-part soul upgrade is the word *Chadash* or new: *chesed, davening and shalom bayit*.

Chadash Upgrade #1- Chesed, or lovingkindness, is B’nai Jeshurun’s social action group that needs your help to volunteer one hour or more this year in its Strength of Many, Power of One drive. Rabbi Akiva teaches that k’lal gadol, our essential directive from the Torah, is “v’ahavta l’rei’ekha kamocho, to love your neighbor as yourself.” Wonderful mitzvah opportunities are waiting for you to help cook or deliver meals to our families dealing with crisis, illness and loss, to volunteer with Family Promise providing transitional housing to the homeless, to help support a new inner-city Cleveland elementary school StepStone Academy, our family nights volunteering at the Cleveland Foodbank and delivering Purim baskets to residents in area nursing homes. To volunteer, just put a sticker next to your name at one of the Chesed tables at Schechter and main buildings during the holidays and don’t forget to bring your filled grocery bag on Yom Kippur for our food collection for JFSA’s Kosher Food Pantry.

Chadash Upgrade #2- Davening or prayer is the ongoing conversation we have with G-d filled with an attitude of gratitude, praise and a listing of our wishes and requests. Older than texting and even the telephone, prayer is our mode of communication reaching deep into our own hearts and up into the Heavens that is both most private and shared with our community. At Shabbat services or in one of our warm and welcoming minyanim, daily services, we raise our voices together acknowledging the good in our lives and pray for that which can be upgraded and

improved. At home, taking a moment to wake up with the words “Modeh Ani, Thank you G-d” and going to sleep with the Shema are the best frames to give our days meaning and intention.

Chadash Upgrade #3- Shalom Bayit, or peace in the house, is the Jewish value of the priority of family and the need for cooperation and harmony at home. Home is the center of Jewish life, teaching and values-making moments. Whether its lighting Shabbat candles, blessing our children, making family tzedaka decisions, cooking bubbe’s mandelbread, discussing the Torah weekly portion with mom, sitting in zaide’s recliner or getting another lesson on tying a Windsor knot from dad, the choices that we make at home and those that our parents made for us guide our path and light the way for our children, our brothers and sisters. Our homes are to be filled with peace, not confrontation or contention, and should be a place of harmony. The rabbis instruct us of the need to work toward domestic bliss, true partnership, respect and love between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings.

The Torah reading on the first day of Rosh HaShana describes the creation of a family with the birth of Isaac and the growth and upgrade of the Jewish people from small family to an entire people. Through difficult decisions made with shalom bayit as the guiding rule, Judaism and Torah were passed from parent to child beginning with Abraham and Sarah to their son Isaac. For us today, a warm, loving home modeling collaboration, forgiveness, open conversation and love is the best gift a parent can give their children.

This new year, when someone asks “*Mah Chadash*, what’s new?” think of *Chadash*, Chesed, Davening and Shalom Bayit as three pitches that you can use to make this year your perfect game. And when we hear the shofar call, “Ayekah, Where are you?” We can answer, “I am in the community doing Chesed, I am in the synagogue davening, and I am home in our shalom bayit- our peaceful home.” May our 5773 upgrade inspire us to be the lobster, to shed our shell and stretch for more as we grow from the inside out. Shana Tova u’metukah, may this year be sweet, happy, healthy, inspiring and meaningful.