

Rabbi Jen Feldman
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5770

Ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, every time I tried to sit down at home to work on this particular sermon I was interrupted by one of my children. Sometimes it was Sol, our 6 year old, wanting help with his train tracks; at other times it was Hillel, our 6 month old, choosing a typically inopportune time to wake from his nap. This reminded me of a story about Rabbi Dov Baer, the second Lubavitcher Rebbe, known as the “Mitteler Rebbe.” Here it is, retold by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

...the “Mitteler Rebbe” ...was so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cry of his baby son. His father, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, heard, and went down and took the baby in his arms until he went to sleep again. Then he went in to his son, still intent on his books, and said, “My son, I do not know what you are studying, but it is not the study of Torah if it makes you deaf to the cry of a child.”

This story drives home the point that even the study of Torah, which has so much to teach us about love and care for one another, does not supercede *acts* of love and care for each other. Regarding the question of which comes first, study or deeds, the answer in this instance is clear. Just do it.

We sound the shofar each day of the month of Elul, up to Rosh Hashanah and on the Holy Days themselves. According to our tradition, the blasts of the shofar are to startle us, to awaken us from our slumber and to warn us that it is *time to get our lives in order*.

This year, let us take that warning seriously and literally. What comes first in our lives? What do we set as highest priority? We are all drawn in so many different directions. Each day may seem like a race to finish, just trying to get enough done before we grab a little sleep before waking and beginning it all again. But in the process, did we honor the things of most value to us? Did we take care of the people we love? Did we respond to the cry of those who are hurting? Did we take care of ourselves?

A story is told of a skilled carpenter who was planning to retire when he was asked by his employer, a contractor, to build one more house. He did so half-heartedly, skimping on materials and workmanship to just get it done. And when he was finished, he learned from his contractor that the home he had just completed would be his retirement gift. It would be his own.

Each day we are building our own houses, our own lives to live in. Will they be expansive homes filled with patience, forgiveness, love and compassion? Or will they be small, narrow, closed in? The answer depends upon the choices we make every day.

On Sunday we blow the shofar for Rosh Hashanah. How shall we order our lives? What kind of home, what kind of life shall we build for ourselves during the coming year?

It's been twenty years since I lived in Japan, but I learned something very important from Japanese culture about the art of living. In Japanese, there are formal expressions -- verbal exchanges -- every time you leave and return to a house. When you leave, you always say *itekimasu* (I'm off), and whoever is in the home replies *iterashai* (go well). When you return, you say *tadaima* (I'm home) and someone replies *Okarinasai* (welcome home). Coming and going, no matter the rush of one's life, are always rooted in relationship. People acknowledge each other. No one leaves unnoticed. No one returns without welcome.

Two decades later, in my home now, eight years of marriage have taught me that you don't leave without saying I love you, and giving a hug or a kiss. If Ben forgets or if I do, we needn't worry: Sol has caught on, and if he sees someone scrambling distractedly to get out the door he calls out "hug and a kiss!"

This is a small thing. It involves only a few seconds, but it makes a difference. It means that I can't -- quite -- rush out of the house with my mind already on what's coming next in my day. It reminds me that family is primary, before whatever it is that I am setting out to do. And it lets me connect with them in a way that strengthens our ties to one another, and brings at least a moment of joy on even the tough days.

As we enter the New Year let us hear the piercing sound of the shofar as the call to get our lives in order. May we consider well the choices we make each day -- the smaller as well as the larger ones -- that build the houses of our lives. And may our choices and our actions help us to lead life richly, with blessing and fulfillment in the year to come. Shabbat Shalom and L'shanah tovah, a sweet New Year to everyone.