

To Do (You) or Not to Do- That is the Question
 Rabbi Leora Frankel's *Erev Rosh Hashanah* Sermon 5778

“*Hayom Harat Olam* -Today the world is born.” We say these words after hearing the shofar every Rosh Hashanah. But last year, I lived them. As some of you may remember, exactly a year ago tonight, as you were gathered over on Forest Avenue to hear that first *tekiyah*, I was going into labor with my daughter Judith. Though it was quite a surprise at the time, I could not have possibly picked a more meaningful date to deliver a baby. In those first hours of 5777, a whole new world was born, quite literally, for Andrew, Miriam, and me. And now here we all are, in what feels like the blink of an eye, at the start of 5778. It’s good to be back on the *bimah* and with our community tonight—live streaming between contractions last year just wasn’t the same!

Childbirth is the perfect metaphor for what we are beginning here tonight. During these next ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we are *all* giving birth—to our *own* new life, our own new *self* for the year ahead. Like labor, this may involve some pain or discomfort (though I’m sorry to say we offer no epidurals to get through services). It will most certainly require an awareness of our vulnerability and mortality. And I pray, as with labor, you’ll have a profound sense of awe and gratitude at the end of it all.

But who exactly is the new self we want to bring to life in this New Year? What dimensions do we need to shed or reshape, what parts of our souls need a reboot?

Starting a new parenting journey with Judith invoked similar existential questions: *Who am I now, as a rabbi, wife, daughter, and mother of two? How will I balance caring for our expanded family and my new professional portfolio? Can I live up to that paradigm of the modern working supermom?* Over the past year especially, when I expressed self-doubt to friends, I noticed a particular trope of

reassurance. Time and again, they would invoke three simple words that seem to be trending: “You do you.”

One afternoon, it was with a close rabbinic classmate, Daniel, whom I met for a quick lunch on my way back from a Long Island funeral. He had lost an impressive amount of weight on a rigorous diet, such that after I finished eating my salad, I guiltily admitted that I was pining for a slice of strawberry cheesecake—my favorite diner indulgence. I confessed the craving out loud intending him to talk me out of it. Daniel surprised me though, insisting that it wouldn’t bother him if I ate the cheesecake in front of him. “You’ve had a long morning,” he said. “Enjoy it even if I can’t. *You Do You!*” I laughed, thanked him, and compromised on ordering a piece to go. “*You Do You,*” I mused to myself as I got back on the L.I.E. a few minutes later. Ok, I’ll try.

Other times it’s with my fellow playgroup moms. I remember last winter, when Miriam’s birthday was approaching, I lamented to them that I would probably never be that mom who has time to bake and decorate homemade cupcakes for my children’s parties or hand-stich Purim costumes. We all laughed. “You do you” one friend piped up, “and anyway, Stop n’Shop has a great bakery!”

In these moments of self-doubt, I often think of the famous Hasidic tale relayed by Martin Buber about a great rabbi named Zusya. Though Zusya had been a renowned Torah scholar and beloved teacher, as he neared the end of his life, he feared God’s final judgment. When Rabbi Zusya was on his deathbed, his disciples found him trembling and crying uncontrollably. They tried to comfort him, assuring him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham, so he was sure to be judged favorably by God when he reached heaven. Rabbi Zusya wiped away a tear replied to his students, “My dear students, when I get to heaven, I will not be asked ‘Why weren’t you more like Moses?’ or ‘Why weren’t you more like Abraham?’ God will ask me, ‘Why weren’t you more like Zusya?’”

While I love the punch line of this parable, I read the ending differently these days, perhaps because Rabbi Zusya's insecurity resonates. It seems to me that throughout his life, he really was being the very best Zusya he could be; he was "doing him." Yet for some reason Zusya was still unsatisfied, unsure that he was fulfilling his potential. Did he have unrealistic expectations? Was he comparing himself too much to the other sages around him?

Now imagine if Zusya had a Facebook account! How much more inadequate Zusya might have felt scrolling through a constant feed of upbeat status updates and selfies. Though Facebook has helped us network, reconnect with old friends and stay in closer touch with relatives, I'll be the first to admit that it can take its toll on our collective confidence. In Facebook-land, everyone is thinner or richer, more successful or happier than we are.

With this constant barrage of comparisons we cannot help but question that our own life is on track. Like Zusya, we wonder if we are measuring up. Maybe this is why the commandment "Do not covet" made it onto God's Top 10 List, as I like to call it. Though it was written some 3,000 years ago, that 10th (and I'd argue, hardest) commandment still challenges us today: "Do not covet... [not] your neighbor's house, nor his wife, his man-servant, his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's."¹ In 2017 though, we might update it instead to, "You shall not covet your neighbor's timeshare, not her Harvard admission nor his holiday bonus."

The coveting is not limited to material possessions either. We look at our friends and can't help but feel a bit jealous of less tangible aspects of their lives too—their relationships, productivity, or sense of self. It's hard to "do you" when it looks so much more fun or fulfilling to "do" someone else's life. And let's face it: there isn't one of us here tonight for whom one part of our life is totally different from what we

¹ Exodus 20:14

imagined for ourselves. Many of us are not where we thought we'd be at the start of 5778. Yet we have been given the gift of another year, and we're all here tonight because we do not take that gift for granted. So how can that phrase "You Do You" help us chart our course forward?

First, we need to focus most on that middle word, *Do*. Though they sound similar, I'd argue that "You Do You" is not simply a trendier version of the old adage "Be Yourself," or as Polonius famously advises his son Laertes in *Hamlet*, "To thine own self be true."² This classic parental guidance is heartfelt but not always helpful. There's a lot of pressure involved, a feeling that you need to first discover your true destiny and then *be* that person. Who among us can say we completely know who we are? And how can we ever be boiled down to being a singular integrated person, let alone one that we can then improve for the New Year? *Being* yourself also implies something about your inner life, what you hold deep in your heart or was innately endowed with.

"You Do You" is completely different. It acknowledges that whatever we may think, feel, or aspire to, that ultimately, *we are what we do*.

This emphasis of conduct over creed is one of the fundamental differences between Judaism and Christianity. You can believe *almost anything* you want about God (or be a declared atheist for that matter) and still very much be Jewish. Or as Rabbi David Wolpe puts it, "Spirituality is what you feel, theology is what you believe, religion is what you *do*."³ What defines Judaism as a religion far more than belief or even feeling, is a code of behavior, of ritual and ethical practices we are to enact. If you do sacred deeds, live out Jewish values in your daily conduct, it is almost irrelevant what you believe about God.

² Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

³ Kushner, Harold S. *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*. 2015.

Rabbi Harold Kushner offers an analogy: “Religion is like love. The difference between religion as feeling or believing and authentic religion as how you live out your faith is like the difference between love as a teenage girl’s crush on her favorite pop singer and love as the relationship between [spouses]” who have made years of sacrifices for one another, shared life’s burdens and joys. The first is theoretical, “a pleasant fantasy”; the second is life-defining.”⁴

Kushner clarifies that “beliefs, theological premises, don’t qualify as religion until we translate them into behavior. Feeling sorry for a homeless person or feeling lucky that we have a roof over our heads [...] doesn’t help the homeless person [...] until we translate those sentiments into helpful acts.”⁵

Judaism’s elevation of behavior over belief, and the “Do” of “You Do You” can be a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to the work of *Teshuvah* that we’re engaged in this week. On the one hand, it means that however good our intentions, we will not be judged by what is deep in our hearts, but by how we use our hands, our words, our time. It’s like that moment in *Batman Begins*, when Bruce Wayne’s childhood friend Rachel, bumps into him leaving a fancy hotel with two female escorts, soaking wet and seemingly drunk. Embarrassed to be seen in this state by her, he feebly tries to defend himself, insisting, “Rachel, all this... it’s not me... *Inside*, I am more.” Rachel shakes her head in disappointment and says, “Bruce, deep down, you may still be that great kid that you used to be. But it’s *not* who you are underneath; it’s what you do that defines you.” From that point on Bruce begins to change, such that his opulent public persona turns out to be the real mask, not the Batman costume.

The flip side of “You *Do* You” is that it is far more achievable to change and reshape an aspect of what we do than altering our very essence or ingrained attitudes. As any Cognitive Behavioral Therapist will attest, it is not always realistic or even possible to change one’s thoughts or feelings. Behavior,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

however, is eminently malleable. Sometimes just we can't help but feel frustrated or angry, but we can certainly work to make sure we don't yell or become violent when those feelings bubble up. And while we tend to assume that if we think differently, we'll act differently, the same is also true and often easier: if we act differently, we'll think differently.

Take the groundbreaking study by Robert Zajonc, who proposed that our facial expressions not only reflect our inner emotions but can also cause them.⁶ He found that subjects who were forced to smile more during his experiments, even by accident, reported higher rates of positive feelings. Smiling releases a whole flood of “feel good” neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, all of which also help relieve stress. *Don't believe me? Try it*—curl your lips into a big smile for the next minute (but try to keep listening). Then see how it feels when you relax your mouth afterward. Even once you do, your brain circuitry will be primed to return to that smile and make you feel even just a little bit happier.

This same philosophy is probably behind the Torah's great wisdom of *Na'aseh v'nishmah*, that moment when the Israelites are standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai accepting those 10 Commandments I mentioned earlier. They have no time to ask questions, delve into God's rationales behind this one or that. Rather they leap into the covenant with these famous Hebrew words, “*Na'aseh v'nishmah*, we will do and we will listen.”⁷ In other words, they agree to start living out the *mitzvot*, to do Judaism, knowing that only then can they begin to understand it.

So if we are what we do, instead of simply asking yourself, “Who do I want to be this year?” or even “How can I be a better parent/spouse/child/colleague/friend?” consider instead: “What will I *do*

⁶ To learn more about the study, read Daniel Goleman's summary: <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/18/science/a-feel-good-theory-a-smile-affects-mood.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=0>

⁷ Exodus 24:7. Though chronologically these words appear during the consecration of the Tabernacle, through midrash the rabbis understand it to have been said by the Israelites even before Revelation.

differently?” For instance, rather than thinking to myself “I want to be a better mother,” a more productive question might be: What maternal behaviors do I want to enhance this year? What would it actually look like? (i.e. keeping my phone out of the room when I’m with the girls so that I can be fully present). The mantra of “You do you” can help push us to take concrete steps back to our best self.

But not everyone is so fond of this trendy catchphrase. Pulitzer Prize-winner Colson Whitehead offers a scathing critique of the You-Do-You mentality: “In a world where the selfie has become our dominant art form,” he writes, “‘You do you’ just feeds a growing culture of ‘narcissism.’”⁸ From his perspective, the phrase embodies a self-absorbed millennial mindset; it gives implicit permission to pursue one’s own agenda without regard for anyone else around. And he has a point. What happens if the you you’re doing isn’t very nice? Where are the limits of living out our authentic selves, at least as they start to bump up against others “doing them”? Whitehead warns that “‘You do you,’ taken to its extreme, provides justification for every global bad actor. The invasion of Ukraine is Putin being Putin, Iran’s nuclear ambitions Khamenei being Khamenei.”⁹

This is precisely why Rabbi Hillel didn’t just leave it at, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me.” He then immediately added, “But if I am only for myself, what am I?” We need that second line, that caveat to temper our own ambitions and egos when they get just a little too inflated and we lose sight of those around us.

There seems to be an underlying premise in the logic of “You Do You” which presumes that each of us is operating in our own, isolated orbit. I do me, you do you, and we’ll all be cool if we just keep enough distance. But life doesn’t really work that way. For most of us, our weeks are filled with an endless

⁸ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/magazine/how-you-do-you-perfectly-captures-our-narcissistic-culture.html?mcubz=0&_r=0

⁹ Ibid.

series of interactions with *other people*. And *them doing them* actually makes a huge impact on what kind of day *we* wind up having. How we drive during our commute, whether we make eye contact with strangers on the train or smile at colleagues as we enter the office. Even offhanded comments we make to our spouses or children, can all influence another's experience.

A parable to illustrate: A story is told of a King whose daughter was to be married. He sent out invitations to his entire kingdom for everyone to come and celebrate at the feast. He asked that guests bring no gifts but instead that each household, in the weeks before the wedding, should bring a pitcher of their finest red wine to the town square. There, he had erected a huge barrel and when it came time to toast his daughter and her new husband, they would do so using the shared bounty of the entire community.

As the weeks passed and the wedding date grew closer, a representative from each household came to the town square, climbed up the ladder, opened the lid and poured their pitcher into the huge barrel. It slowly filled with each offering until it was almost completely full.

Finally, the day of the wedding arrived. The bride and groom stood under the Chuppah, rings were exchanged, the glass was broken. Everyone shouted "Mazal tov!" Then, at the beginning of the feast, the King prepared to bless the wine and called for the 1st toast. He held a clear, crystal glass up to the tap on the bottom of the barrel. He broke the seal, opened the spigot and out came a stream of pure....water!

You see, each towns person, as they heard about the King's request, thought to themselves: "So many people are contributing to the King's toast, and it's such a huge barrel, if I just pour water in, no one will

know the difference! So, one by one, thinking that their small contribution wouldn't make such a difference, each person poured water, not wine, into the barrel.

The moral of this story is obvious, but worth stating: Every member of a community has value and their contributions make a difference. And even when no one's looking, our choices will affect others.

There's just no way around it. We human beings are intrinsically bound up with one another, and each person's behavior ripples out—certainly to those living under the same roof, but also even strangers halfway across the world who we may never meet, but with whom we share this earth and its limited resources.

My choices around what kind of car to drive, using plastic or reusable grocery bags, running my heat or air-conditioning all day, will eventually impact the air *you, your children and your grandchildren* will breathe. Climate change, unlike our HVAC systems at home, doesn't have customized, adjustable zones. And that is just one example that underscores the limits of "You Do You." We are all in this thing called life together, and we won't survive it without relying on one another.

We witnessed this first-hand just a few weeks ago as hurricanes Harvey and Irma tore through the coasts of Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean. Following a year of such widespread divisiveness and even violence in our country, stories of outreach and acts of compassion suddenly began to emerge and embody the best of what it means to be an American. At least briefly, everyone dropped "You Do You." And while it took natural disasters to collapse the silos, in the wake of the storms, we were reminded that whatever race, ethnicity, or political affiliation we are all on "Team Humanity."

I actually spent most of my high school vacations in Houston with my closest Young Judaea friend, Tali Paransky. Serendipitously I was visiting with her family in Chicago the weekend that Harvey hit. Over

that Shabbat, we were anxiously in touch with Tali's mom, a widow, as the rain and winds started. For Tali's mom, this reminder came through a local couple who took her into their home on higher ground for the brunt of the storm. Then when the waters receded, it was echoed by the local synagogue teens who helped her for hours schlepping all of the destroyed furniture and carpet to the curb. Her ranch had to be ripped down to the studs, and she was one of the lucky ones.

Others risked their very lives to save others. Maybe you read the story of Alonso Guillén, a 31-year-old Mexican immigrant or so-called "dreamer" who arrived here undocumented at age 15 and received protection through Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (or DACA) program.¹⁰ Described as a "happy soul" who loved soccer and music, after receiving DACA a few years ago, Guillén got his driver's license, bought a house, and began a radio career.

Then on August 29, despite his father's pleas to stay put, Guillén piled into his white Chevy Tahoe a few friends and made the 120-mile trek from Lufkin to help rescue those trapped in the floodwaters of the Cyprus Creek suburb. Once there the young men set out on five small boats and used a walkie-talkie app on their smart phones to find those in danger. Late that night, as Guillén and his group were on their way to pluck survivors from an apartment complex, their rescue boat slammed into an Interstate 45 bridge and he was tragically killed.

Wearing a cross around his neck that night, Guillén fulfilled that Talmud teaching, "Save a life and you save the world." His story, and those of so many others this past month, is that it is often that we do the very best version of ourselves, only when we are reaching out and doing for others. His story reminds us that at end of the day, and especially at the start of the New Year, there is *only we*, only us. It's true;

¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/09/05/a-dreamer-dies-trying-to-save-harvey-victims-days-before-trump-plans-to-end-daca/?utm_term=.bc81a7d56806

we can't share our personal gifts with others until we've identified and refined them. That takes introspection, personal prayer and individual courage. But we also cannot do the spiritual work of recreating ourselves, of birthing our best life, alone. That is why all of our High Holiday liturgy is written in the collective- *Avinu Malkeinu*- Our Father, Our King (or if you prefer, Our Parent, Our Sovereign). *Ashamnu, Bagadnu*- we have sinned, we have transgressed. There is no "I," "me," or "you" in our *Machzor*. So we begin this ten-day journey in the plural, more secure in the knowledge that we are all in it together. No one soprano, baritone, base, cannot hit all the notes of our communal symphony tonight. We need each others' voices.

So this Rosh Hashanah, I wish for all of us a renewed sense of personal vision, of feeling confident in your own skin (maybe even a little more than *Zusya* did), of reconnecting with what it will take to not just be, but really *do* that best version of ourselves this year. AND, let me add a little asterick to my initial premise with some fine print: You do you with generosity. You do you with compassion. You do you, but *not only you*.

Then, God-willing, together we will do the holy work of healing our world and ring in the year 5778 with more kindness, justice, and peace for all. Amen.