

**Embrace Imperfection, But Still Strive to Improve & Do Teshuvah**  
**Rosh HaShanah Day 1 Sermon 5776/ 2015**  
**by Rabbi Lisa S. Malik**

The following are the results of a study that describes "The Perfect Rabbi":

The Perfect Rabbi gives 2 sermons every week that are intellectually engaging and spiritually inspiring.

The Perfect Rabbi emphasizes the importance of observing mitzvahs, but never makes anyone feel inadequate.

The Perfect Rabbi works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is dedicated to spending quality time with his/her family.

The Perfect Rabbi makes about \$50,000 per year, wears nice clothes, drives a nice car, and donates about \$50,000 per year to tzedakah.

The Perfect Rabbi is 28 years old and has been in the rabbinate for 30 years.

The Perfect Rabbi spends at least a few hours a day with babies and preschoolers, a few hours a day with children in Grades K-8, a few hours a day with teenagers, a few hours a day with young adults, a few hours a day with middle-aged adults, and a few hours a day with senior citizens.

The Perfect Rabbi visits 10-15 people a day in the hospital and is always in his/her office at the shul when somebody stops by.

This 'study' goes on to suggest that if your rabbi does not measure up to these standards, that you should conduct an international search for The Perfect Rabbi. This year, the market is pretty good. You should receive about 360 applications from rabbinic candidates and one of them will definitely be perfect.

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There are a few different reactions that my rabbinic colleagues and I have had to this so-called 'study':

- 1) Reaction #1 is to **laugh...** at how ridiculously unrealistic the expectations are that most congregations have for their rabbis.
- 2) Reaction #2 is to actually **reflect & think about how we can become better rabbis.**

Admittedly, the more natural reaction is to laugh at this joke. But, even amidst the laughter, we can learn something from "The Perfect Rabbi" `study'. **Even though it's unrealistic to achieve perfection, as a rabbi in particular or as a human being in general, that doesn't mean that we still can't strive to be better than we currently are.** Just as it's OK to have a healthy dissatisfaction with the world around us, it's OK to have a healthy dissatisfaction with ourselves, as long as that **dissatisfaction leads to striving for improvement.**

A) **Striving to improve the world** around us is known in Hebrew as, "*tikkun olam*," which literally means, "repairing the world."

Even if we don't think that our efforts can make a difference, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't at least try to do our part, to take some small steps to make the world a better place.

As **Rabbi Tarfon** teaches in, **Pirkei Avot 2:21**

*"Lo alecha ha-m'lacha ligmor v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimenah."*

"[Even though] you are not required to complete a task, yet, you are not free to disregard your responsibility [to do some part of the task]."

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B) In addition to striving to improve the world, we, as Jews, should strive to **improve ourselves as individuals** in some way that **connects us more strongly to God, to the Jewish people, to the Land of Israel, and to Torah.**

**We may not all be on the same rung of the ladder of Jewish learning or observance.** But the important thing is to be **somewhere on the ladder-** "**willing, learning, and striving**" to do more mitzvot. It is important to strive to be the best Jews that we can be, as individuals and as members of a community.

**Rabbi Tarfon's** teaching can apply to improving ourselves as well as to improving the world. Just because it may not be realistic to observe all 613 commandments, that doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try to observe some of them. It's **not an all-or-nothing proposition**.

And **just because you're not doing something now, that doesn't mean that you won't in the future**.

This philosophy was expressed by the German-Jewish existentialist philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), who lived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rosenzweig's parents belonged to an assimilated Jewish family with little attachment to Judaism or Jewish life. He himself, although extremely well educated in general German culture and especially proficient in the classics of philosophy, had, at first, hardly any Jewish knowledge. A cousin who had become a Christian urged Rosenzweig to take the same step. Rosenzweig felt that, if he was to convert to Christianity, he ought to do so as a Jew, moving, as he saw it at the time, from a lower to a higher form of religion.

While contemplating his conversion, he attended an Orthodox synagogue in Berlin on Yom Kippur. At services, he was so profoundly overcome by the devotion of the members of the congregation as they sought forgiveness from the God of their ancestors that he realized there was no need for him to find his salvation outside of his ancestral faith.

While Rosenzweig believed that he would one day become a fully observant Jew, he also believed in a gradual approach in which Jewish observances slowly made their impact by ringing a bell for him. Typical of this approach is Rosenzweig's answer to someone who asked him whether he wore *tefillin*. Rather than replying, "No, I don't wear tefillin," he said, **"Not yet."**

Rosenzweig was expressing an important principle: not to say "no" to a Jewish observance, but to remain open to change and to embracing new practices when the time is right.

Rosenzweig's "not yet" philosophy is reflected in the following story about the Lubavitcher Rebbe & the President of the NY Board of Rabbis:

At one time, Rabbi Morris Kertzer was the head of the NY Board of Rabbis. Ever so often, he would meet with Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, & the two of them would trade religious and political insights. One day, Rabbi Schneerson called Rabbi Kertzer and asked to meet with him in person. When they saw each other, the two spiritual leaders exchanged warm greetings. Rabbi Schneerson then explained that there were plans to build a series of high-rise apartment building in his neighborhood, close to Chabad headquarters in Crown Heights. Reb Schneerson said to Rabbi Kertzer, "Morris, since you have some political influence with the authorities in NY, could you make a request that the lower floors of these building be reserved for Jews so that they won't have to use the elevator on Shabbos?" Rabbi Kertzer replied, "I'll try, Menachem. But don't you mean that the lower floors should be reserved for Chasidic Jews, for your followers?" The Lubavitcher Rebbe corrected Rabbi Kertzer, "No, no, no," he said. "Don't just make the request for Chasidim. Make the request for all Jews." Rabbi Kertzer seemed surprised. He asked, "But Menachem, don't you know that there are many many Jews who use an elevator on Shabbos?" To which Rabbi Schneerson responded, "**From what a Jew does today, you cannot predict what a Jew will do tomorrow.**"

(This story, "Reserving the Lower Floors for Jews" was told by Rabbi Jack Riemer in the book, "Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories," p. 41.)

The moral of this story is the **capacity of people to change for the better.**

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**Resolving to improve ourselves** and the world around us is part of the process that is referred to in Jewish tradition as "**TESHUVAH.**" We usually think of "*teshuvah*" in terms of **correcting bad behavior.**

A **quintessential example of this type of *teshuvah*** was demonstrated by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century rabbi, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, who was known as **Resh Lakish.** After the Destruction of the Second Temple, when Israel was under the rule of Rome, Resh Lakish was the head of a group of bandits. As if that wasn't bad enough, he was also a gladiator who fought and killed wild animals for money.

But one day, Resh Lakish met up with Rabbi Yochanan, who convinced him that he should leave his life of robbery and slaughter to study in yeshiva and study Torah. So Resh Lakish did *teshuvah*, and left behind his life of ill repute, ultimately becoming one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation. (Source: Bava Metzia 84a).

**Other examples of this type of *teshuvah* can be found in the biblical Book of Jonah,** which we will read at Yom Kippur Mincha, the penultimate service of "*Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah*" ("The Ten Days of Repentance.")

**Jonah** was called upon by God to go to the city of Nineveh and encourage the citizens to repent. But Jonah initially ignored God's call. Why did he disobey? Why didn't he want to heed the word of God? What kind of prophet was he?!

Some commentators say that Jonah knew that the people of Nineveh would one day rise up against Israel, that they were an enemy. So, he felt that they deserved to be punished for their sins.

Jonah tried to run away from God, stowing himself aboard a ship. While on the boat, a storm arose. Jonah, oblivious, or at peace with his decision to ignore God's call, slept below the deck. The sailors eventually identified Jonah as the cause of the storm. Despite their protests, Jonah insisted that they throw him overboard. He refused to do God's bidding.

Poor, poor, Jonah. There was no easy way out. He could not even get himself drowned. God prepared a big fish to swallow him. As Jonah hit the water, he became trapped in the belly of the fish. He had wanted death. Instead, he was neither alive and free, nor dead; he was in limbo.

We may disagree with God. We may fight or resist God. But, no matter how hard we try, **we cannot escape from God.**

Realizing that, Jonah opened his mouth in prayer. In the second chapter of the Book of Jonah is the most beautiful prayer, a poetic prayer from the depths, Jonah's pure expression of **teshuvah**. Jonah spoke from the heart: how he felt so removed from God, how there was no metaphoric light at the end of the tunnel. Jonah said that he was so deep in the depths that he couldn't even see the storm above him. In just a few lines, he expressed his feelings of loss and despair. Jonah looked at himself in bare spiritual terms as he suffered in the belly of the fish.

And then, what did Jonah say next? Jonah promised God,  
*"Ach osif l'habit el heychal kod-SHEH-cha"* **"I will once again gaze at Your holy Temple."**

Jonah realized that if God had given him this cocoon, it was **an opportunity to do teshuvah, to return**. If Jonah could return from having defied God, then he could do it all the way.

Jonah was essentially saying to God, **"I have run so far from all that is holy - have abandoned it, have favored death – but if You haven't given up on me - then I can improve my ways and return to You, by doing *teshuvah*."**

Emboldened, Jonah saw himself bringing sacrifices in the *Beyt HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The spirit of *teshuvah* moved Jonah to envision himself as an active participant in his religious life.

Jonah said to God, **"I have abandoned You, tried to run away from You. You have chastised me. And.... You have given me the opportunity to return. And return, I shall. And I shall even bring offerings of thanks and appreciation to You for giving me the opportunity to do *teshuvah*."**

Jonah's prayer was not like the breast-beating *teshuvah* that we do on Yom Kippur. His prayer did not start with the words, "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu*" and it did not include a long list of "*Al Chet*"s. Without even stopping to confess and spell out his misdeeds, Jonah realized that he yearned to be close to God. There, in the belly of the big fish, envisioned his return.

Was this chutzpah on Jonah's part?

No. On the contrary; **the Book of Jonah presents a pure form of *teshuvah***. And none of us has done so badly, and none of us has run so far, and none of us is so removed, that we cannot wish for the same. The message of Jonah's prayer is clear. If you truly will it, then you are there.

**Resolved** to complete his mission, Jonah was dropped off by the fish on the sand. He didn't even need to swim ashore.

**Teshuvah is open to all of us**, however far removed we may feel from God or Judaism. *Teshuvah* is open to all of us, however low and abandoned we feel. If we want to return and we take the necessary steps to return, we are given the red carpet treatment.

The desire to draw close, to be close, the imagination that you are close, the commitment to be close to God and the Jewish community will take you right there.

You can do it. Now. Seriously. There is nothing in your past, nothing you have done, no skeleton in your cupboard so revolting that it precludes your decision right now to do *teshuvah*, to return to God. We know that because Jonah did it.

From the depths of the big fish, Jonah returned to his journey. He fulfilled his mission as a prophet, proclaiming to the people of Nineveh, "*Od arbaim yom v'Nineveh ne-he-pachet*". "In 40 days, Nineveh will be overturned, destroyed."

While Jonah might have perceived the role of his prophecy as nothing more than foretelling an inevitable future, the people of Nineveh had a very different understanding of the prophet's message. They viewed the prophecy as a warning, and as a goad to action, prompting them to change their evil ways. The **people of Nineveh** heard Jonah's words and **they** did *teshuvah*, just as **Jonah** had done *teshuvah* in the belly of the fish. The people of Nineveh responded to Jonah's words by fasting and by putting on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning. When they heard Jonah's prophecy, they feared for their lives. And, by doing *teshuvah*, they were able to save themselves from destruction!

As I said earlier: **We usually think of “teshuvah” in terms of correcting bad behavior. But *teshuvah* is not just about correcting ‘bad’ behavior. It’s also about striving to be ‘good’ or ‘better,’ striving to be the best we can be.**

Of course, this is the perfect time of the year on the Jewish calendar to do this type of *teshuvah*. These are, after all, **“Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah.”** (“The 10 Days of Teshuvah.”), a great time for making **New Year’s Resolutions**, for resolving to make improvements in our lives. While you, of course, are welcome to make the same type of resolutions this week that you might make on January 1, I would suggest that you consider making some **resolutions that have a specifically Jewish twist.**

Since **7 is a nice Jewish number** (7 days of the week, 7 days of celebration after a Jewish wedding, 7 days of the shiva mourning period, and 7 weeks between Passover & Shavuot), I would like to offer **7 concrete suggestions, 7 Jewish New Year’s Resolutions** that I’d like you to consider. PICK ONE of these 7 ideas & make it your New Year’s Resolution for 5776

**(PURPLE HANDOUT)**

## **7 Jewish New Year's Resolutions Suggested By Rabbi Malik:** **Pick One For 5776!**

1-**Come to synagogue for services more often.** If your past tendency has been to come to services 1-2x per year on the High Holidays, try to come for at least one more holiday in the year ahead. If, in the past, you came to services 6 times per year, try coming once per month on Shabbat. If, in the past, you came to shul once per month, resolve to come twice per month. If you used to come to services twice or three times per month, try to come every Shabbos. Consider becoming a 'regular' at shul!

2-**Turn Saturday into Shabbat**, if not fully, then in at least some ways. If you don't already light **Shabbat candles** or say **Kiddush** before Friday night dinner, resolve to **start** doing these rituals at least once a month, beginning this week! If you already light **Shabbat candles** or say **Kiddush**, but only do so occasionally, resolve to do these rituals **more frequently**.

3-Pick a **Jewish holiday** that you have never observed before & start observing it to some extent this year. Never built a Sukkah? Perhaps this is the year that you resolve to build one. Never shook a Lulav & Etrog? Make this the year when you come to shul on Sukkot to participate in the Lulav & Etrog parade it around the sanctuary? Never danced with a Torah on Simchat Torah? Make this the year that you do.

4-Another Jewish New Year's Resolution is to **give more tzedakah** in the year ahead and to be more purposeful about the way you allocate your donations to different organizations. The Torah teaches us the concept of giving a "*maaser*" or "tithing." This means that the tzedakah ideal was to give 10% of your earnings to tzedakah. If your particular financial circumstances make 10% unrealistic, then figure out what you realistically can afford to donate. Then, think carefully about which causes you want to support. Of course, Jews shouldn't only give tzedakah to their synagogues (in the form of membership dues, Kol Nidrei donations, and participation in other shul fundraisers) and to other Jewish organizations, but that's a good start: whether it's to your local Federation (ours is the Federation in the Heart of NJ), or to one of the many charitable organizations in Israel.

5-Commit to engage in **more acts of loving kindness (*gemilut chasadim*)**. Consider participating in TBA's Mitzvah Day (October 18, 2015) and getting involved in other activities organized by TBA's Social Action Committee. Consider volunteering to feed the hungry by serving food to people in need at the Bayshore Lunch Program at the Community Church of Keyport. (For more information: [www.kitchenatstmarks.org](http://www.kitchenatstmarks.org)) Or consider volunteering to serve food at the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation's new "Soul Kitchen" Community Restaurant at the Union Beach Firehouse, the very place where many TBA members volunteered their time in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. (For more information: [www.spoonfullofhope.com](http://www.spoonfullofhope.com))

6-Get **more connected to Israel** this year. Have you been to the Caribbean or Spain or France, but never been to Israel? Resolve to visit Israel this year. (Fulfill the promise of, "This year in Jerusalem.") Make a definite plan to save money to make this dream a reality. Decide whether you want to go on alone, with your family, with friends, or on an organized trip. Let Rabbi Malik know if you are interested in participating in a congregational trip to Israel in November 2016. Whether or not you are able to go to Israel, you can still support Israel by becoming involved in the Israel Affairs Committee at Temple Beth Ahm and/or by joining the TBA delegation at the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) Policy Conference (March 20-22, 2016). You can also support Israel by giving Israel Bonds as gifts for B'nai Mitzvah, weddings, and other simchas.

7-(Last but not least) (*Acharon, acharon, chaviv.*) Resolve to commit to continue your Jewish education. Resolve to learn to **read Hebrew** this year or to take one or more **Adult Education** classes. Resolve to **study the Torah portion** every week and/or to **read at least one Jewish book** per month: whether it's a work of fiction or non-fiction or a book from the Tanach (the Jewish Bible).

Speaking of biblical books (resolution #7), I want to go back to the **Book of Jonah**. I love this book because it comes to teach us that God gives me a place in this world, no matter who I am... no matter where I am on the ladder: I might be a frightened sailor caught up in God's storm, a whale of a messenger, or a prophet.

It doesn't matter because we all have a place in God's world. **God doesn't expect any of us to be perfect**. I don't have to be "The Perfect Rabbi," and you don't have to be The Perfect Pharmacist or Accountant or Business Executive or Teacher or Lawyer or Plumber or Salesperson. None of us will ever be able to attain the title of "Perfect Parent" or "Perfect Child".

However, just because **we're all inherently imperfect**, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't articulate at least one **New Year's Resolution, striving to be the best that we can be**. In this New Year, **5776**, may we all resolve to improve ourselves and to improve the world in which we live.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon.*

*L'Shanah Tovah.*