

Shanah Tovah. My friend Jacob just celebrated his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Some of you may have met him, when he came from Los Angeles to visit Kol Shofar with his parents Rabbi Bradley and Elana Shavit Artson.

Throughout his 22 years of life, few people have been able to look Jacob in the eye. Why? Jacob is autistic. It is often challenging to look him in the eye; for him to take in the gaze of another person.

I have known Jacob his entire life. When we learned that he was autistic, I vowed to never look away, even when he did. Whenever I come into a space where he is, I do whatever it takes to make eye contact and to greet him. I am not always successful, but I will get into just about any position in order to see his eyes and say, “Hi Jacob – it’s great to see you.”

As Jacob grew up and communicated through typing, he told me how much it meant to him that I made this effort. He told me how many people

simply turned away, figuring that he wasn't aware of his environment or aware of them. People thought and still think it won't matter if they greet him at all. But it does matter to Jacob. He notices.

You don't have to be autistic to appreciate what it means when someone looks you in the eyes and greets you with sincerity. It can make the difference between feeling cared about and feeling ignored, or between people wanting to come back to a synagogue and vowing to never come back. We must recognize the humanity in others but at times, we become absorbed with our thoughts, simply forgetting to reach out.

On Rosh Hashanah, some of us enter the synagogue feeling vulnerable. We think about *teshuvah*, we wonder if we can walk the path of forgiveness with humility. We may be skeptical of our ability to change, to forge a new pattern of behavior. We are painfully aware of our shortcomings. We are just average people, trying to be decent people. We are not so sure of our status that we would call ourselves righteous - *tzadikim*.

On Rosh Hashanah, we greet one another by saying, “May you be inscribed for a good year - *“L’shanah tovah tiketevu.”* And where do we want to be inscribed? In the book of life: a Jewish metaphor for reflecting on our deeds and how our deeds may affect the year to come.

It is actually recorded in one of the great Jewish law codes, the *Shulhan Arukh*, that the righteous, the *tzadikim*, will be inscribed by mid-day on Rosh Hashanah. Just think: all you righteous are “in” within less than twenty-four hours!

When we greet each other this way, we affirm that the person we greet is a *tzaddik*. We look into their eyes and our greeting literally “wills” this into being. It is more than a statement of confidence. We are helping them move higher and higher in spiritual growth by naming their essence. The rabbis teach something very similar about the *mitzvah* of blessing our food. When we bless the food in front of us, we actualize that food in spiritual

way. The farmer may grow it, the cook may prepare it, but with our words of blessing, we elevate the food in a spiritual way. So too it is with New Year greetings and human beings.

Tradition furthers teaches us: if we don't look our fellow shul-goers in the eye and share sincere Rosh Hashanah greetings, we miss out on affirming the reality, or the potential of a person being righteous. By omission, we inadvertently imply that the person is . . . just average - a *benoni*, not a *tzaddik*.

We might approach our own *teshuvah* with skepticism and consider ourselves, just average. But when it comes to others, we give others the benefit of the doubt – we view them as *tzaddikim* with a little help from *teshuvah*. And so when we greet others by saying, "*L'shanah tovah tikateivu*," it is as if we are emphatically saying, "You will be inscribed for a good year," not "may you be inscribed." "You will be inscribed."

Before you leave tonight, greet as many people as you can. Greet them from your heart. Even if you don't know them, look them in the eye and share these words with them, "*L'Shanah Tova Tiketeivu* – you will be inscribed for a good year.

When you arrive at services in the morning, keep greeting one another.

Through this encounter, face to face, we ensure that we are all *tzaddikim*, focused in our efforts toward *teshuvah*. Not only do you exist. You matter and you are righteous. You will be inscribed for a good year! *L'Shanah Tova Tikateivu*.

**Thesis:** How we greet each other can directly impact our teshuvah and our spiritual path during the Yamim Noraim.

**Text:** Shulchan Aruch, Orech Hayyim, Rosh Hashanah,

**Charge:** Greet each other warmly and give one another kaf z'chut – the benefit of the doubt.

Shulchan Aruch

Orach Hayim

Hilchot Rosh Hashanah

Taf, kuf pay, bet: tet – see the TAZ on lshana tova tikatev.