

One Really Good Decision  
Erev Rosh Hashana  
Sam Rotenberg

If you were to start your own calendar, what would be your epoch?

What would be year one on *your* calendar? Would you make it an arbitrary moment? A date chosen randomly... Or likely you would choose a moment that had some meaning. Perhaps you would make year one on your calendar the year you were born. Or, Maybe you would choose a significant milestone, like the first time you walked, or earned a degree, or fell in love. How would you choose what to make year one on your calendar?

Different communities around the world have their own calendars with their own epochs. 622 CE: this date might mean little to you. This was the year of Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina, and marks year one for 1.6 billion Muslims. According to this calendar the current year is not 2017, but 1439. 554 BCE: this was the year that Buddhist tradition holds that the Buddha attained parinirvana, and marks year one for the Buddhist calendar. According to that calendar, the current year is 2571. Let's see if you can guess this last one: 776 BC: this date marked the first olympics and became year one for the Ancient Greek calendar.

What is apparent from all of these calendars is that there is always an underlying value associated with the epochal year against which all time, and all moments within time, are measured. Each year is, at its core, intimately connected with that first year of the calendar. According to the Muslim Calendar, moments matter because Mohammed found a safe home for Islam. For Buddhists, time itself is a reminder of the transformative promise of nirvana. For the ancient Greeks, each year is a reminder that the human body can attain perfection.

So how do Jews measure time? What is our epochal year? For us, and for all of the Jews coming together around the world tonight, the year is 5778, which makes year one in our calendar 3761 BCE. This date was derived by a Rabbi name Jose Ben Halafta around 160 CE who painstakingly counted the years that transpire from the beginning of Tanakh through the end. That means going systematically through the Torah, through all of the prophets, through all of the books in Ketuvim and adding up the years as recorded in these book. The latest material in the Tanakh are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and they during the height of the persian empire. From there Jose ben Halafta added the years of the fall of that empire, the conquest of Alexander the great, followed by the rise of

Rome, all to find out that before the common era, according to the Torah, 3761 years had transpired. It was at that moment that the Jewish calendar was born, with year one set at the creation of the world.

The creation of the world is, by the way, not the obvious place to start the Jewish calendar. The very first line of Sefer Bamidbar, the book of numbers, begins by counting Jewish time not from the creation of the world, but from the exodus from Egypt: “and God spoke to Moses in the sinai desert at the tent of meeting - בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנַיִת לְיֵצֵאתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם - on the first day of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from Egypt.” The exodus from Egypt is probably the logical place to begin the Jewish calendar, not only because it the most critical moment of Jewish historical memory, but the Exodus is already considered year one in the Torah itself! So why is it that we do not count our years from the exodus, or any other moment of Jewish historical memory? Why was it so important to those sages 2000 years ago to connect Jewish time to the creation of the world?

For full disclosure, I know the world was not formed 5778 years ago, but the idea of beginning our calendar at the genesis of creation remains intriguing. I believe that the sage who painstakingly counted the years of

the Tanakh in order to make for us a calendar that starts at the beginning of everything would want us to imagine our calendar beginning at the beginning of everything, at the genesis of our universe 14 billion years ago. What is the value gained in thinking about our present reality in those terms, where this moment is intimately connected with that epochal moment, the first moment of our universe? To answer that question, we should look to some of the underlying values of Rosh Hashana.

On Rosh Hashana we focus our mental energy on self reflection and teshuvah - repentance - correcting mistakes of our past. The liturgy is full of moments that call on us to self reflect and figure out exactly what those pieces of ourselves are that we wish to change in the coming year.

In the Rambam's mishna torah, the first major code of law from the 11th century, he asks this question: **אי זו היא תשובה גמורה**? What is complete teshuvah? That is, who is the one who has completely transformed him or herself so that they have truly repented and are different? He writes, "It is a person for whom the same situation in which he has sinned in the past arises, and he has the potential to commit the same transgression again, but because of his repentance he abstains from doing so." **לא מיראה ולא מכשולון כח** - it is not because of fear of getting caught or

from a lack of energy that this penitent abstains from transgressing, but מפני התשובה because of his commitment to his repentance alone. After a lifetime of transgressing, making the decision to abstain one time is all it takes for someone to reach complete teshuvah.

Take a person who has been a thief his whole life and at a moment when he could steal again he truly regrets his past actions, he wishes to be a different kind of person, and chooses not to steal. Rambam would say this person has achieved complete teshuvah. But, isn't this problematic? This person has his whole life in from of him! So what if he made a decision in this moment not to steal, what if he is in this situation again in the future? Why doesn't the Rambam require that in order to prove true penitence this person never transgress again for the rest of his life? Why say that all he has to do is choose not to transgress one time to prove himself as having reached complete teshuvah? Because of the power of one really good decision.

To illustrate the power of one really good decision, I'll relate a story about a close family member of mine, who I will refer to in this story as Sarah. For years Sarah struggled with her weight, both because of genetics and because of a lack of self-control when it came to making decisions

about what to eat. Sarah wanted to change. For her health and her happiness, she needed to change. She knew the person she wanted to be and about a year ago she made a promise to herself to become that person. Since then, she has lost almost 100 pounds, and has become more lively than I've ever seen her.

About a month ago she came to visit me and my family in Los Angeles, and during a Shabbat dinner we found ourselves seated in front of some indescribably delicious fresh, home-baked, challah. After about 20 minutes of talking about how she was not going to eat the challah, even though it smelled so delicious, and even though a taste really couldn't hurt, and even though this and even though that, Sarah grabbed a piece of the challah, brought it close toward her so she could smell just how good it was, and then put it down and decided then and there not to eat the challah.

Had she eaten the challah, knowing her, she would have felt terrible about herself. It would have become an excuse for her to eat even more things that would have made her feel terrible. And, While It is true that Sarah has fallen off her diet before, and she may falter again, because she made this one really good decision she affirmed her identity as a changed

woman, and this decision empowered her to make even more positive decisions in the future. That one really good/really hard decision, crystallized in Sarah a new identity, one that - no matter what transpires in the coming year- will *a/ways* be a part of who she is. This choice propelled and will continue to propel her for who-knows-how-long toward a way of living she is proud of.

So, why *is it* that the Rambam says that complete teshuvah, that perfect penitence is proven by one's choosing not to transgress just one time? Because he understands the profound truth that one really good decision can change a life.

The power of one really good decision is at the heart of the meaning of Rosh Hashana, and the reason why those sages close to two thousand years ago connected this season of teshuvah with the creation of the world. Because indeed one really good decision affects more than just one person.

We saw this reality play out in a study that facebook conducted in January of 2012. The New York Times report on that study read: "For one week in January 2012, [Facebook] had altered the number of positive and negative posts in the news feeds of 689,003 randomly selected users to

see what effect the changes had on the tone of the posts the recipients then wrote. The researchers found that moods were contagious. The people who saw more positive posts responded by writing more positive posts. Similarly, seeing more negative content prompted the viewers to be more negative in their own posts.”

The tone you bring to a situation is contagious, all the more so the actual choices you make. One really good decision does not just affect you, but it affects the people around you. Of course I was inspired when I watched Sarah make that very difficult decision to stick to her diet. Making good choices inspires others to make their own good choices. But not only that! we learn in the Talmud that a good decision has cosmological significance.

In the Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 40b, our Rabbis describe a particular vision of the world we live in. They explain that the world is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, If we were to take all of the good things and all of the bad things done by all of the people on earth at any given moment and place the good things on one side of a scale, and the bad things on the other side of the scale, that scale would be perfectly balanced, and the thing that tips the scale - the determining factor for

whether or not this world is good or bad - is your next action. עשה מצוה אחת  
happy is the one who -, אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות  
performs a mitzvah for he tips the scale of the moral quality of himself and  
the whole world toward goodness. עבר עבירה אחת - אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו ואת  
For the one who transgresses - woe to him, for he tips  
כל העולם לכף חובה, the scale of the whole world toward depravity.

Our Rabbis connected this season of teshuvah with the creation of  
the world to remind us that we are intimately connected with the beginning.  
We are to imagine a timeline with two points. The first is the birth of our  
universe. Call it the voice of God 5778 years ago, or the big bang 14 billion  
years ago, point A on the timeline is the beginning of everything. Point B is  
us in the present moment. Whether or not everything in between these two  
points is good or bad, the moral quality of nothing less than the entirety of  
all creation depends on the choices we make here and now, and the  
choices we will make in the coming year.

When we act from a place of love, or kindness, or justice, or mercy,  
we prove that the universe was created for love, kindness, justice, or  
mercy. When you make the hard choice to take one stroke upstream  
against the current of a bad habit, when we find ourselves in a situation

where we could without consequence steal again or take advantage again, or transgress again, and we choose not to, not only do we change our lives but we prove that the arc of this universe bends toward justice, and goodness, and light.

Rosh Hashana is the holiday where we reclaim this awesome power. It is the day where we declare that although we did not choose to be born we determine the moral quality of our life. We declare that although we did not create this world, we do determine its character.

We reflect during this season about teshuvah: pieces of our lives we need to repair, incessant shortcomings that have plagued us for years that we know must be addressed. To do complete teshuvah, we do not need to commit to a life of perfection. To do so might be terribly overwhelming. Rather, our focus ought to be this: What is one moment in this upcoming year where you can, perhaps where you need, to make one hard, really good decision. One time is all it takes. If we reflect thoroughly on that question, and ultimately choose well when that moment comes, not only will we set ourselves up for a sweet year, and a better life, but we tip the scale of the whole world toward goodness.