

Awareness of ourselves

1. We've come together as a community through the past year of 5770, and we've celebrated and welcomed the New Year yesterday, the first day of Rosh Hashanah. And so today we can say, "Baruch Hashem", "Praises to God". It's a powerful phrase from our tradition, and a colleague of mine discovered that it could potentially reduce our dependence on foreign oil. He designed a car that runs on Jewish faith. To start the car, you say, very clearly, "Baruch Hashem", and the faster you say it, the faster the car goes. To stop the car you say, "Amen."—just like we do at the end of every prayer. He recently loaned the experimental car to a senior engineering and theoretical physics student at MIT named Larry Cohen. Larry got into the car for a test drive—so he starts slowly chanting "Baruch Hashem...baruch hashem," he gets on the highway and chants faster and faster—unfortunately he's not looking at the road, he veers off and is heading toward a cliff. He's flustered and terrified as the edge is approaching, and he can't remember the Stop word—and then at the last moment, a breath away from driving off the side, he finally remembers and shouts, "Amen!", and the car stops. "Ahhh", he sighs in relief, raises his hands to heaven in thanksgiving and says, "Baruch Hashem!"
2. In one moment, one instant, fate hangs in the balance—the spoken word brings a series of actions to a halt. And somewhere beyond the bounds of this amusing story, we hear the echoes of a heavier tale with the same features. A tale we heard from the Torah today, the Akedah—Binding of Isaac.
3. The angel calls out to Abraham in an eternal moment in the story. He's taken the knife to carry out God's command, and the angel calls out "Avraham, Avraham!" And Avrahams' ears perk up, as he responds, "Hineni-Here I am!"

4. All the sources, the great Jewish teachers and thinkers of the past believe that Avraham is moving through his divinely ordained actions with no notion of doubt or disbelief. He is of a one track mind, like a horse with blinders galloping toward the finish line.
5. Today is an opportunity for a deep breath for us. If we feel we've been galloping forward through the past year, then we may be in the same stream of thought and action as Abraham, fully committed to going forward, but perhaps not considering the full implications and meaning of each step we take along the way.
6. And if there is a problem of navigation. If we're veering off the track, or simply getting caught in a rut or two along the way is there any way that we can come to an awareness of this *before* we make the mistake, commit the *averah*, the wrongdoing, the sin? Can we develop an ability to hear the angel calling to us in the moment and catch ourselves and redirect? It is possible to develop a sensitivity to our thoughts, words, and actions to help us catch ourselves earlier, in the midst of what we're doing, or avoiding, to change what we're doing.
7. The ability to be in full control of our self-awareness could be a great gift to ourselves for this New Year, and if this effort on our part could filter into the world at large it could be an amazing transformation that would help to create, a more thoughtful place for us all to live as we continue to confront & face the challenges that unmitigated hate, intolerance, and oppression can cause.(pause)
Baruch Hashem!
8. It is always easier to know that we've done wrong after the fact. It becomes clear in so many ways that we've said something terrible, that we've hurt someone's feelings, that we made a poor decision. We've all experienced the sudden rush and anxiety of wanting to take back what we said. We've all pounded a fist on the table when we fouled up, forgot, twisted, broke something or wished we had acted differently—and we replay that moment in our minds over and over...Wouldn't it be amazing if we could know ahead of time or in the moment, even on half the occasions? And even if we still fell

down half the time, with a rising sensitivity wouldn't we be more ready to forgive ourselves and accept our rebuke with a greater peace of mind?

9. What we do wrong is not always the result of intention. Judaism recognizes *averot*/sins that we do *bi'mayzeed*/with intention and by accident or unwillingly *be'shogeg*. We all would hope that forgiveness and understanding would come easily when we do something *be'shogeg*. We assume that unwillingly means we would never want this experience to happen by our hand under any circumstances. We are as surprised and dismayed as the person who suffers as a result. Would that all sins that we commit be *be'shogeg*.
10. But they are not all unwilling—under lighter or heavier circumstances we make decisions about what to say and what to do. How can it be that we choose to act in ways that hurt others?
11. The Sage of the Talmud Resh Lakish teaches us, "*Ayn adam over averah ela eem ken nichnas bo ru'ach shtut.*" Meaning: A person does not commit a transgression unless he/she is seized by a *ruach shtut*—a spirit of nonsense. A spirit of nonsense?! A nonsense spirit might sound like some awkward demon that enters the body. But I think that the statement is more subtle—Reish Lakish is saying in effect that when we sin we're not fully ourselves. We're not acting in a way that fulfills the best of who we can be. Rabbi Nissim of Gerona extends the thinking of Reish Lakish and explains that the nonsense spirit is like an anti-Torah, an inclination that undercuts the very foundations of our faith.
12. Can we put up walls to surround ourselves and protect ourselves from the influence of the *ruach shtut*?
13. To answer this question, first try to think back over the past year. Put yourself back into a situation, a moment you wish you could have done differently. Take a moment.// Can we see ourselves recognizing that we made a bad decision, or a decision that at first seemed right but that we later came to regret? Can we see ourselves in the moment when we feel the pit in our stomach as we wonder how we could have said what we just said or how we could have acted the way we did?//

14. At that point it was already too late—but we are now trying to fine tune our consciousness, to become better listeners, to become more sensitive. We're seeking to raise our level of awareness to a new height. We're striving to hear the angel Mi'cha'el calling to us in the moment as he called to Abraham. Stop! Wait!
15. There is reassurance for us within Jewish tradition. We read in the Talmud that even if we have in our minds the inclination to say or do the wrong thing, we have not sinned yet! We are only held accountable when we're planning in our minds to worship idols. And so if a thought enters our minds, we still have an opportunity to step into the Angel's heavenly shoes and alert ourselves to what is really taking place.
16. A larger, more challenging question in this line of thinking: Can we win back the souls of those who seem to have committed their lives to causing shame, pain and suffering to others?
17. Last spring a Neo-Nazi group placed hate-filled brochures on cars in the Glen Rock commuter lot. This past summer a similar group vandalized a synagogue in Olney, Maryland where a friend of mine is the Rabbi. We continue to fear the aggressive and oppressive regimes that surround the State of Israel as Iran further develops nuclear capabilities and continues to help Hizbullah rearm and strengthen itself in Southern Lebanon with a big increase in the number of rockets in Lebanon pointed toward Israel, one year ago Hizbullah had 20,000 rockets. There are likely more today, many hidden near or below civilian areas as shields. The regular Lebanese army attacked the Israeli army in an unprovoked action causing the death of Lt-Col Dov Harari and three others this past summer. We heard with tears and a tear in our hearts about the murder of Kochava Even-Haim, Avisha Shindler, Yitzhak and Talya A'mes as they traveled home by car in Israel. Oppression continues in Sudan and in North Korea, Myanmar, and elsewhere.
18. Can we have any hope of convincing those whose lives are dedicated to hate and the oppressive control of other people that they too can hear the voice of the Angel in the story of Abraham?—

Abraham who is the ancestor of all those who worship in synagogues, churches, and mosques. Can we have hope that they might see that peace is more beneficial to both sides than the ugly alternatives?

19. In the mornings, after the opening blessings of the birkot hashachar, we say, “*Al tashlet banu yetzer hara!*” May the evil inclination not have any control over us! We may want to add to our prayers, May the evil inclination and the nonsense spirit no longer have dominion over the minds and actions of world leaders and other people who have tragically centered their lives on the terrible influence of these forces.
20. And at the end of every service we recite Alenu -- a prayer that got its start right here in the heart of the High Holidays, in the Mussaf that we’ll daven in just a few moments, and in this prayer we’ll continue to yearn, to shout out the words that are too often hidden in the silent reading of the second paragraph of Aleynu *Lehafnot elecha kol rishey aretz...*We will turn the evil ones of the Earth toward You, toward the Eternal One. It’s our mission, our responsibility to try.
21. Wow—we have a lot of work to do this year. We exploring the possibility that as individuals we could walk the path of developing a self-awareness that will clue us in when we’re not feeling or acting whole in speech and in action. A daunting task. Can we create the space within our lives as we know to do this work? Can we set this effort as a target for the arrow of time that launches forward from today?
22. But we did not stop there! We face the challenge of our world so afflicted in some places with great hatred, and pain, as we wonder: Can our message and our increasing self-knowledge and sensitivity set an example for others to follow? How far can the message go if we pay it forward? Can we be the gentle but powerful priests of a new faith in human potential and circle the worlds of intolerance, prejudice, and debasement of human life until the walls that surround them—that create them—crumble like the walls of Jericho did so long ago?
23. Can we inherit and extend the message of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who taught us to meet physical force with soul force? Can we find a way of sharing this message while living in strength?

24. Now is the time Dr. King said at the Lincoln Memorial, 47 years ago in 1963. Now is the time! Today—starting with the power of our own minds and hearts bound together by the soul, the very force that keeps us alive and sustains us through these difficult times.
25. Rosh Hashanah still is only the beginning of the High Holiday season this year. It's only the beginning of a process by which the Shofar will pull us out of the soul-exhaustion that often threatens to overcome us. Let us join together as one community now in our effort to create the deep and abiding level of sensitivity we aspire to have in our lives. However lofty the goal of being aware in the moment may be for us, it is possible—it is within our reach. And by Yom Kippur may we fulfill the teaching of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, that on Yom Kippur we will be closer to being like the angels the way God hoped we would be, closer to seeing the reality and impact of each word, action, and message that comes from our hearts and lips. For God once said, "*Ani amarti, elo—heem atem, uvney Elyon kulchem.*" "I said you were as Holy Ones, all of you offspring of the Exalted One."(Ps. 82:6) That was God's wish, and although only Moses could remain on the high level of being like an angel when we stood at Sinai, on Yom Kippur again we will all become like angels through the power of Moses who joined himself to the whole community of Israel.(Sefat Emet book 355) We'll all taste the possibility of being angels who can call out to ourselves and remind us in the moment of what is the right thing to do.
26. Shana Tovah umetukah—May we all experience the potential sweetness of every moment this year in our individual discovery and growth, and as a community walking hand in hand into the New Year.
- Amen.