



Rosh Hashanah Family Sermon 5786: Be The Hero Rabbi Lisa Berney

Ever since my older daughter, Shifra, saw *The Little Mermaid*, she's been obsessed with villains. We even gave her the book *Disney Villains: The Essential Guide to the Evilest of Them All* for Hanukkah last year.

One morning, at the breakfast table, after paging through the stories of each evildoer, she shared an interesting discovery: almost every animated villain lies to get what they want. As we examined the pages of her book, we discovered that indeed, she was right.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula deceives Ariel, to get revenge on her older brother King Titan. In *The Lion King*, Scar deceives, well, everyone, to become king of Pride Rock. In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel deceives Rapunzel to keep the power of her hair to herself. In *Frozen*, Prince Hans deceives Anna to get closer to the throne. In the world of animated film, deceit is the trademark of villainy.

But, ever the connoisseur of animated films, Shifra quickly observed something else: villains aren't always alone in their use of deception. The hero of another animated classic, *Aladdin*, also lies to get what he wants. When Aladdin discovers a genie, he pretends to be a prince so that he may woo the princess. But his steadfast refusal to tell the truth nearly dooms the entire kingdom.

So why does Aladdin, a liar and a thief, get his own movie while these other liars and cheats are relegated to evil and villainy? Why does Aladdin get to be the hero?

Because he changes. He grows. At the conclusion of the film, Aladdin isn't the same boy who started it. Faced with the opportunity to once again become a prince, he remarks, "I have to stop pretending to be something I'm not."

And, perhaps *that* is the most important difference between villains and heroes. Heroes grow. They change. They evolve.

And so must we.

On Rosh HaShanah, the sound of the shofar calls us to *teshuvah*, to return to the very best versions of ourselves.

According to the medieval scholar, Maimonides, one who is given the opportunity to make the same mistake but refuses to do so because of their personal growth represents the fulfillment of *teshuvah*, of true repentance.¹

In Judaism, the hallmark of heroism isn't so different from the movies. It's the ability to grow beyond our mistakes.

Maimonides lists five distinct steps for making change in our lives: First we must recognize our mistakes. We can't change anything until we're willing to take the time to reflect so that we can see with better clarity the choices we've made. Second, we must take the time to feel regret for what we've done. Remorse can be a powerful tool, not to hold on to, but to help us acknowledge hurt we may have caused. Third, we must resolve to change. We must make a real and honest commitment. Fourth, we must say out loud or in writing how we've failed and how we'll avoid this mistake in the future. Not to poke at our shame, but because often, we can't accept responsibility until we say it out loud. And, finally, when presented with an opportunity to repeat our mistake, we must choose differently.²

If that sounds like a lot of work, well, that's because it is. We all know that change is hard. And our habits and patterns can make us feel stuck. Whether we're balancing homework, extracurriculars, and friendships... or juggling work, parenting, schlepping our kids everywhere... all while holding the weight of the world...whether we're facing illness, or loss, or grief... or caring for our loved ones...an intensive course in spiritual growth can seem... well, impossible.

¹ Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:1.

² Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 1:1-2, 2:1-2.

But our tradition teaches that one of the most powerful ways we can change the world is by changing ourselves. Consistently striving to become the most loving and whole versions of ourselves so that we not only feel more content, more grounded in our character and values, but also so that we can offer *that* version of ourselves to others—becoming the most loving parents, children, siblings, partners, bosses, friends, and neighbors that we can be.

The Chasidic teacher, Simcha Bunin, famously teaches that true wrongdoing isn't making poor choices. We're human. Of course we make mistakes. Even the greatest heroes do. Rather, wrongdoing takes place at every moment that we can do *teshuvah* – that we can change our behaviors, make amends, and choose a different path — and we don't.

As we begin this New Year of 5786, we possess the incredible opportunity to author our own stories. How will they read? Will we, like our heroes, seek to grow and evolve? Will we take the time to examine our misdeeds and commit to acting differently in the future?

Or will our stories read like one of the pages in *The Essential Guide to the Evilest of Them All*? The same patterns, the same mistakes, the same choices over and over again?

Our tradition invites us into this season because it believes in our ability to grow... to not let the world decide who we are, but to restart and recommit again and again to becoming the people we yearn to be. One moment, one choice, one action at a time.

In this New Year, let's inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life and Growth. In this New Year, let's choose the path of work, the path of change, the path of *teshuvah*. In this New Year, let's be heroes.