

Good yuntif
Shana Tovah

The sanctuary looks different than it did last year, doesn't it?

The bimah is lower. The chairs are new. If you've been coming to this sanctuary for five, ten, or even forty years, your body knows that something has shifted.

Hold onto that feeling of uncertainty, because nearly three thousand years ago, our people were feeling the same way. So a Psalmist wrote a poem.

Some of you may be familiar with this one, Psalm 118. There's a line: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Ha'even ma'asu ha'bonim—the stone the builders passed over, dismissed, set aside—haitah l'rosh pinah—has become the cornerstone—the very thing the whole structure rests upon.

Now, these builders, our ancestors, were constructing the First Temple in Jerusalem. They were skilled. They were experts. They had looked at thousands of stones. They knew what a cornerstone needed to be—the right dimensions, the right weight, the right grain. And they looked at one particular stone and originally they rejected it. Not out of malice. Not out of laziness. They dismissed it because it didn't fit their idea of perfection.

And then, somehow, that stone they passed over became the cornerstone. The object the whole Temple rested upon.

I've been thinking about this verse for months, especially after I injured my back in April. You see, for weeks afterwards, when all I could do most of the time was sit and look at what was around me, I started to pay attention to things I had dismissed as unimportant.

I thought about what we see, and about what we decide isn't worth seeing, and what happens when we look again. When we give certain things in our life a second glance, maybe even a second chance.

Recently, Rachael and I were hanging a mezuzah at a congregant's home. Many of our doorways have a mezuzah. But we don't think about them very often.

We notice it when we move in, and we notice it when we move out. And in between those two moments? It provides spiritual protection, quietly enveloping our home with its sacred magic. We come through the door and we don't clock it. But there are words inside that mezuzah written on a tiny scroll that are thousands of years old. We put all this effort into placing, blessing and putting it up, and then we forget about it. Meanwhile, while we become experts in maintaining the physical wellbeing of our home, we miss the spiritual cornerstone—the mezuzah.

Earlier, I told you about a verse from Psalms: Ha'even ma'asu ha'bonim—the stone the builders passed over, dismissed, set aside—haitah l'rosh pinah—has become the cornerstone—very thing the whole Temple rests on. However, two verses before the one I read you—two verses before "the stone the builders rejected" — the psalmist writes "Open the gates of victory for me, that I may enter them and praise God. This is the gateway to God; the victorious shall enter through it."

Here's the move I want you to make tonight: When you enter your home, I want you to register, for one second, that you are passing through a door that has been marked holy on your behalf, that someone, probably you, took the trouble to mark it, that there is Torah in your house that is closer to you than your bookshelves, closer to you than your machzor, closer to you than almost anything you would call religious — and it has been there, quietly, the whole time.

The builders in Psalm 118 didn't fail to notice the stone because they were careless—it just didn't fit their expectations.

We don't miss what matters because we're rushing. We miss what matters because our minds have already pre-sorted the world into what deserves our attention and what doesn't. For many of us, the mezuzah falls into the second category. And I've begun to notice that a lot in our lives fall into that category as well.

In my spare time, when I'm not rabbi-ing, I like to collect cards. Sports cards. Pokémon cards. The whole ecosystem. I started when I was a kid, and it came back to me in a real way while my back was healing. I couldn't move around very much and I could do it while sitting still. . While I was going through my old cards, I learned the term "junk wax," meaning cards that aren't worth the paper they're printed on. I thought about why I collect and what the cards mean to me. (And) They may not be worth any money, but they hold a lot of sentimental value. Even though I like to trade cards, I save the "junk wax"—the cards that aren't worth a thing.

But I also have another quirk: when I open up new cards I like to save the foil wrappers. They're shiny and gaudy and completely purposeless the moment the cards are out. Most people throw them away without thinking. But this spring, I decided to flatten them, smooth them out, and— with some mod podge, a glue gun, and a canvas, I made a piece of art. A big, shiny, ridiculous, kind of wonderful piece of art made entirely from the things others throw away.

Rachael's reaction when I showed it to her was something like: "I think people who really love this stuff would love it."

Which is not quite an endorsement. But I love what I made.

The stuff that no one would think to use, that we might walk by without seeing its value—that's what gets me.

I'm not the only one who finds beauty in what normally gets ignored. In 1952, a composer named John Cage walked onto a stage at a concert hall, sat down at a piano, opened a score, and played nothing. Not a single note.

For four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Three movements. Total silence.

The audience was confused. Some were furious. They had come to hear music.

And then something happened. In the absence of what they expected, they started to hear what was actually there. The sound of rain on the roof. Someone's cough, the audience itself: breathing, shifting in their chairs, uncertain. Cage's argument was both simple and radical: you were never sitting in silence. You just filtered out everything your expectations told you wasn't music.

Every time I pray, I think about those four minutes, because there is a certain moment that happens in Barchu.

Jessica calls out Barchu et Adonai HaMevorach. And then there is a single breath, maybe half a breath, where no one speaks. The space between the call and the response hangs there.

I want to tell you what that moment feels like from up here.

It is terrifying.

It's the moment before a slow clap catches on. It's the moment when you're the only one standing at the end of a performance, waiting to see if anyone else stands. You put the words out there, and for one beat—is anyone there? Did anyone hear? Is my mic on?

And then every single time the congregation answers. Baruch Adonai HaMevorach l'olam va'ed. And the moment closes, the service moves on, and no one thinks about it again.

But I want you to think about it. That breath—that terrifying, suspended, unrepeatable breath—is not a gap in the prayer. It is the prayer. In that moment, without a single word being said, we do something extraordinary: we become a community. The beauty of this moment is multiplied because, regardless if we're reading the Hebrew or the transliteration—everyone is included.

Tomorrow when we say Barchu, listen for that momentary breath. Really pay attention.

See if you uncover something of hidden value, something you've never seen before, something you need. We are better off when we take a second look, when we consider what we might have written off.

Rosh HaShanah is about giving last year a second look. So we may have a clean slate for a fresh start. We come into this night bearing the signs of a year well lived and well loved. So I

brought two things with me tonight to show you.

[Hold up or display the two graded cards]

These are graded trading cards. This one is a PSA 10. This one is a PSA 7. PSA stands for Professional Sports Authenticator—it's a scale of one to ten, based on four criteria: corners, surface, centering, and edges. A 10 is pristine—quite literally perfect. A 7 is a card that has been around.

On the market, a PSA 10 is worth significantly more than a PSA 7 of the same card. The grade is authoritative and also incomplete.

Because here's what a PSA grade cannot tell you: why this card is a 7. Was it carried in a wallet for twenty years by someone who loved that player? Was it the first card in a kid's collection — the one that started everything? Was it traded on a playground between two friends who are now adults who haven't been in touch in years? The grade tells you about the card's present condition, but it tells you nothing about the life it has lived.

Now: here is the theological turn.

Many of us experience the High Holy Days as a card grading submission. The Book of Life feels like a grading service. We send ourselves in—corners, surface, centering—and we wait for our number. Did we live a 10? Or was our year more like a 5 or a 6? We come to these days worried about our condition. Worried about whether our corners are sharp and our edges are clean.

But if we take the tradition seriously, if we sit with what cheshbon hanefesh actually asks of us—if we take an account of our soul—the truth is it has nothing to do with surface condition. It's not about how we look on the outside. It's about where we've been, who we've held, and who has held us. It's about the life the card lived.

A pristine card that has sat in a vault untouched since the day it was made is not more valuable to the people who love it than the vintage card that went everywhere.

The purpose of Rosh HaShanah is not for us to come in pristine. It is to account for where we've been and who we've been for the last year.

We've had moments that were both holy and mundane—moments that we passed off as unremarkable that have since become the cornerstone of our year. Just like the stone the builders rejected—these moments can become the cornerstones of our lives.

Tonight, we learn to look again.

Shanah tovah.