I’m sick and tired of all this sin and repentance stuff! I know, it’s only Erev Rosh Hashanah, we haven’t even gotten to Yom Kippur yet. But every year, it’s the same thing:

*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha…*

For the sins I committed against you…

*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu…*

We betray, we steal, we scorn…

Enough already; enough beating ourselves up. We literally pound on our chests as we say these words, flagellating ourselves on the inside and out. I’m done.

This year I want to spend my High Holy Days thinking about all the goodness in my life. I want to focus on the things I got right and the people that helped me get there.

I know I’m being somewhat flippant, and I know how important it is that we take the time to see the hard truths about ourselves and do the difficult work of self-criticism, but we can’t stop there – we need to keep moving, and then focus on what went right this year.

There is a tradition of reaching out to our loved ones during the *Yamim Nora’im*, the 10 Days of Awe, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. During this time of self reflection, of *heshbon hanefesh* (literally, an accounting of our soul), we seek forgiveness from those closest to us. The problem is, we often fail to seek forgiveness from ourselves.

We focus so much on what we’ve done wrong and who we’ve hurt, that we fail to see what we’ve done right and who we’ve helped. We focus so much on the pain that others have caused us and trying to forgive them, that we forget about the love and goodness we’ve received.

So instead of just calling all the people I may have wronged this year, I’m going to call all the people that made a difference in my life this year and thank them. I’m going to thank them for the gifts they gave me; the knowledge, the love, the support.

This all may come as a shock to you, but everything that I am saying, you actually know already. Think about the way that you raise children, or train a pet, or teach anything, really. We’ve all learned about positive reinforcement. We all know the expression “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Positive reinforcement works.

This is not about self-congratulations. This is not about boosting our own egos so our heads can’t fit through the synagogue doors. This is about taking what we did right and magnifying it though
conscious introspection. If we showed kindness, how can we show more this year? If we gave money or time, how can we give more? If we loved someone, how can we show them more love this year? It’s about strengthening the best parts of ourselves so they become ingrained in who we are.

I am proposing that on Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish New Year, a time for introspection and personal change, we don’t just focus on the negative, on the ways we’ve missed the mark; but instead we reinforce the positive, and remind ourselves of the good.

In our family, we have two cute little wire-haired dachshunds, Rio and Lupe. Lupe, as adorable as she is, sometimes still has accidents in the house. So how do I fix this? Do I take her by the back of the neck and shove her face into the accident and yell at her? Of course not! Every trainer will tell you that doesn’t work. What do experts say you should do? Praise and reward her when she goes to the bathroom outside.

Our tradition has a word for this – hakarat hatov. Often translated as gratitude, it literally means, ‘recognizing the good.’ Our new machzor (our High Holiday prayer book), Mishkan HaNefesh, even has a whole new section focusing on hakarat hatov, remembering the good to balance out the traditional confessional, the vidu’i.

Immediately following the Yom Kippur morning confessional, we read, “Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught: Always look for the good in yourself.” Nachman reminds us that recognizing the good, hakarat hatov, is not a given. We have to be mindful and really pay attention find the good that has always been there.

I’ve learned a lot from our dogs, mostly patience, but when it comes to celebrating the good, I’ve learned the most from my daughter. We always talk about how much we can learn from young people; how they bring a different perspective to life. Josephine has taught me about hakarat hatov. Her new ritual is to celebrate every moment by calling out, “I did it!” Whether it’s brushing her teeth by herself, opening the door, putting on her shoes, or telling one of her parents what to do. Everything is: “I did it!”

“I did it!” has now become a new slogan in our house to help us recognize moments when we succeed. Whether it’s doing the dishes, finishing all the leftovers, or making it to bed before falling asleep on the couch, I’ve found myself literally yelling out, “I did it!” It may seem silly, but it helps reinforce those positive behaviors. Beating yourself up every time you fail is not the way to effectively and positively change behavior. What a world we could live in if everyone were constantly praising our success; and if, we too, gave ourselves more opportunities to shout, “I did it!”

It is human nature to focus and dwell on the negative. That is why Rabbi Nachman makes a point of telling us to look for the good. We don’t need to be told to look for the ways we failed – we rarely have a hard time finding them. We seem to only remember the times when we mess up. I was talking with a friend the other day. Frustrated at being late, she said to me, “I always miss the bus,”
“You ALWAYS miss the bus?” I responded.

“Well not always… but it feels that way,” she said.

I asked her to actually think about how many times she had taken the bus in the last month, and how many times she had missed it. It turned out she had only missed the bus 4 times out of about 40. That’s not so bad. The problem is, we only notice the 4 times we miss the bus, and forget about the 36 times we get it right. We take our successes for granted.

If we only concentrate on our mistakes, on our cheit, the way we miss the mark, that’s all we’ll see – a pattern of mistakes. We will be self-cheiting Jews. But if we also recognize all the times when something goes right, even if it is supposed to go right, even if that is the norm, we begin to create a different narrative in our own minds.

This is what hakarat hatov is all about. It’s about noticing the blessings in our lives. And noticing that blessings we bring to the world with our lives, recognizing the everyday good in us and around us.

In our new machzor, Rabbi David Hartman (z”l) writes about hakarat hatov:

The personal significance of Yom Kippur ultimately turns on the individual’s ability to believe that his or her life can be different. The main obstacle to t’shuvah is not whether God will forgive us but whether we can forgive ourselves – whether we can believe in our own ability to change the direction of our lives, even minimally. T’shuvah is grounded in the idea of an open future, in the belief that the possibilities for human change have not been exhausted that the final chapters of our personal narratives have not been written.

Through recognizing the good in our lives, recognizing our potential for change, recognizing all that we are already doing right, hakarat hatov, we have the power to not only change ourselves but to change the world.

So what’s stopping us? If it’s so easy to recognize this good in others, then why is it so hard to apply these same principles with ourselves? Why are we our toughest critics?

We constantly have an inner dialogue with ourselves, and how we speak to ourselves becomes habitual. When something doesn’t go well, do you say things to yourself like, “I can’t believe I screwed up again,” or “I should have done better?” Even if you do a great job, do you get out the microscope and look for the tiniest mistakes? If you got a 99% on a test would you criticize yourself for not getting 100%?

I challenge us to focus on the good, hakarat hatov, to rework those critical statements into more positive ones. If you made a mistake or could have done better at a task, teach your inner critic to say something different. You might say, “I made a mistake again, but I continually learn,” or “I will try to do better next time.” Make it positive, and see those criticisms as opportunities for growth.
Also do your best to see the glass as half full in situations. If you got a 99% on a test, congratulate yourself on mastering the material instead of magnifying the 1% you missed.

Most importantly, stop making comparisons. “Oh he’s so much better at tennis than me….she’s a much better speaker….I’ll never be able to compete with their talent.”

Tomorrow morning, we will read from the very beginning of Genesis, B’reishit. In it, we are taught that every person is an individual, created b’zelem Elohim, in the image of God, with unique talents and circumstances.

So can you honestly say there is a true comparison between you and someone else? If another person inspires you to improve, that’s great, but don’t use someone else as a measuring stick for your own achievements.

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, “Why weren’t you Moses or why weren’t you Solomon or why weren’t you David?” But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, “Why weren’t you Zusya?” Like Zusya, we spend our lives comparing ourselves to others, when in reality the only person we can compare ourselves with is our best self.

Lastly, be kind to yourself. Pretend for a moment that you are talking to your best friend. How would you approach them if they felt like a failure? Would you talk to them the way you talk to yourself? Of course not! You would approach them with sensitivity, love, and compassion. So why not do the same for you?

If you find yourself slipping into that negative inner critic role, stop for a moment and get out your speech that you use for others. Use those words of wisdom for yourself. “You can do it… you have a lot to offer… you did the best you can...” Continue to practice self-kindness and compassion. And be patient with yourself. You are a wonderful work in progress, so there’s no reason to be so hard on yourself!

People often ask, “What is the most important prayer of the High Holy Day season?” Kol Nidre? It has a whole service named for it… Unetaneh Tokef? The haunting words of martyrdom from Rabbi Amnon of Mayence… Or maybe Avinu Malkeinu?

I would argue, this New Year, look to a simple prayer that we say, not only on the High Holy Days, but, traditionally every morning. Elohai Nishama Shenatata Bi, T’horah Hi – My God, the soul You have given me is pure.

What a powerful statement. At our core, we are good people. The very being of who we are is pure. No matter how much we mess up, no matter the mistakes that we make, we must remember that, deep down, we are entrusted with a pure, good, holy soul from God. This is hakarat hatov, remembering, in even when we get down on ourselves, that we are good.
I began tonight by telling you that I was done with the whole repentance thing. I’ll be honest, I said it for the shock value. I’m still going to say the traditional prayers of repentance and take the time to repair the broken relationships in my life. I still plan on apologizing to others and myself for the wrongs I have committed, and taking time to focus on my failings so that I can move that much closer to the target this next year.

But let me be clear, that is just one part of t’shuvah. And maybe it’s not even the biggest part this year. T’shuvah is all about balance.

We read in the Talmud, Kiddushin 40b:

> Throughout the year, regard yourself as equally balanced between merit and sin, with one act, you can tip the balance for yourself, and for the world. Every mitzvah makes a difference. And so it is written, “a righteous person is the foundation of the world,” for one who does good tips the balance of the scales and can save the world.

T’shuvah is a careful balancing act of being judgemental and merciful to ourselves. Of recognizing our faults and our strength. If the scale is tipped too far towards judgement, we lose our self-esteem and become bogged down in defeat. And vice versa, if the scale is tipped too far the other way, we can become over-confident and conceited.

One of my favorite texts in the Talmud posits the hypothetical question, “What does God pray on Yom Kippur?” The sages answer, that God says, “May it be My will that my attribute of mercy outway My attribute of justice.” In this beautiful metaphor, the rabbis of the Talmud understood the importance of this balance, and prayed for the hope that we, like God, could be merciful towards ourselves.

Similarly, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa once wrote:

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: “For my sake was the world created.”

But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: “I am but dust and ashes.”

I think, especially in today’s world where we are constantly comparing ourselves to fictitious, facebook enhanced lives of our friends and acquaintances, it is easy to feel lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate and we need now, more than ever, to reach into the right pocket of hakarat hatov, and remember that the world was created for our sake.

As we begin our High Holy Day season, remember t’shuvah, the word that is often translated as repentance, means so much more than just fixing our mistakes. T’shuvah, coming from the Hebrew word lashuv, to return, is about returning to who we are and who we were meant to
be. It is about deep, lasting change; it is just as much about about turning towards what we are doing right as it is about turning away from what we are doing wrong.

*T’shuvah* is sometimes translated as atonement. When I was a student at Brandeis University, the campus rabbi, Al Axelrod, used to pronounce this word as, “at one-ment.” *T’shuvah* is about being at peace with who we are, both the good and bad. Striving for change but not beating ourselves up.

*T’shuvah* is about taking a *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. I’ve been taught well by our finance committee that when looking at the books, it’s not about just the expenses, we also need to look at the income; we need to look equally at our credits and debits. So too with our souls, don’t just focus on your liabilities, look at your assets; *hakarat hatov* – recognize the good.

I leave you with words from our prayerbook. In response to the traditional short confessional, “*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*…We betray, we steal, we scorn…” We also read, “*Ahavnu, bachinu, gamalnu*… We loved. And we wept. We were kind – and spoke thoughtfully.

We were faithful and trusting. We put forth effort.

We were mindful. We embraced. We took delight in the holy books.

We were creative. And we yearned.

We fought for justice – and searched out the good.

We tried our best. And we were attentive.

We did what You commanded us to do.

We found meaning in Torah. And, most of the time, we did what is right.

We proclaimed Your name. And we were accepting.

We were joyful. And we cared.”

May we continue to recognize the good of this past year and may this lead us to more acts of goodness in the coming year.

*Ken Y’hi Ratzon.*

May this be God’s will.

Amen.
Shanah Tovah.