

LETTING GO OF YOUR BAGGAGE

Shana tova! Here we are again, another Rosh Hashanah. As the prayer book says, “Days pass and the years vanish.” It’s precisely because of the speed of a life that so much of Judaism is designed to help us notice the moments along the way. Of all the beautiful prayers we recite or sing or simply listen to this evening, one of the most meaningful to me is one from the very beginning of the service, one that we have the chance, God willing, to say frequently throughout the year. It is the *shehecheyanu*. We are encouraged to say it at seemingly small moments such as when we put on a new piece of clothing, or taste a food for the first time-or even the first time that year. And we say it at profound moments of great joy such as a baby naming or a bar or bat mitzvah. It is an expression of gratitude, but not in the common sense of saying thank you for receiving something. Rather, the *shehecheyanu* offers thanks for the gift of having literally made it to this moment. We are not saying “thank you for the new dress,” or even, “thank you for this new baby.” Rather, we are saying, at large moments and small, “thank you for my life.” The translation is “Thank you God for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for bringing us to this moment.” The implication, of course, is that we might not have been privileged to reach this moment. The *shehecheyanu* is, at its heart, an acknowledgment of the fragility of our lives. And it is a reminder that we should celebrate every chance we get.

It is also an acknowledgement, as the poet says, that life is a journey. We do not stand still. The root of “*V’higianu* - brought us” is *l’hagia* – to arrive. We have arrived at a discrete moment in the journey of our life. A *simcha*, a holiday. *Shehecheyanu* makes us take the time to notice these moments, to savor them. Unlike the ordinary, daily journeys that we take, where the goal is simply to get where we’re going, we don’t see *shehecheyanu* moments as delays or inconveniences keeping us from quickly getting to our final destination. Indeed, in the journey of life the final destination is definitely not the point; we do **not** say *shehecheyanu* at a funeral. Judaism insists that we take the time to give thanks for the moments along the way. In the words of the automobile ad, “Life is a journey; enjoy the ride.”

You may have noticed that the object of the verbs of the *shehecheyanu* are plural: not “giving **me** life,” but rather “giving **us** life; sustaining **us**; bringing **us** to this moment.” Even when you recite it as an individual, even when there is no one else around, you still say it in the plural. Why? I don’t know. I’m sure that each of you could come up with a beautiful and meaningful reason. My current guess is

that even though there are times when each of us feels very much alone, the *shehecheyanu* reminds us that we are all one another's companions on the road of life, all taking this journey together. Sometimes we know the folks that we are traveling with and sometimes we don't. But we acknowledge our milestones together.

This summer my personal journey happened to involve a bit of airplane travel, one trip to Israel and another to North Carolina. I expect I'll have more to say about North Carolina next week. As you all know, when you travel on an airplane these days you give a lot of thought to what you're bringing. What goes in checked luggage, what goes in carry-on? Can I possibly avoid checked luggage at all? On this last trip I noticed something for the first time: the airlines no longer call it luggage. They always call it baggage. You're never asked how many suitcases you're bringing or do you have a valise to check. "Would you like to check a bag?" "All bags must fit in the overhead compartment." On my trip to Israel I had a lot of baggage. On my trip to North Carolina I had one small piece of baggage. The question I'd like us to consider tonight on the eve of a new year is, "how much baggage are we each carrying with us on the journey of life?"

At the airport, there are baggage handlers. Who helps you handle the baggage of your life?

And what if there was a TSA for that type of baggage? Can you imagine? The TSA checking your emotional baggage. Imagine the kinds of questions you might be asked each morning as you resume the journey of your life:

"Are you carrying any unresolved issues?"

"Have your issues been in your possession the entire time?"

"Has anyone asked you to carry their issues for them?"

At regular airport security, right next to the baggage scanner there is always a garbage can filled with the contraband that travelers have tried to bring onto planes: water bottles, shampoo bottles, full-size tubes of toothpaste. What would the garbage can next to the emotional baggage scanner be filled with? Bottles of tears we never let go of? Full-size grudges? The hurt of previous relationships? Moments when we failed to accomplish what we had hoped?

I want to share a story with you about both the literal and figurative baggage of our lives. I heard it from my colleague Jack Riemer, who swears that all of his stories are true and that some of them even happened.

He tells the story of a woman named Jennifer who lives in Chicago and took a business trip to Las Vegas. She works in the entertainment industry, and had a wide variety of clothing and accessories in her suitcase.

When she got home she discovered that the saying, “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” also applies to baggage, because that’s where her bag had remained. The airline promised her that it would be on the next flight, and that they would deliver it to her house as soon as it got there, but a day went by, two days went by - nothing.

She called the airline and gave them the ticket number again, and after being transferred several times, a supervisor told her that although she had a valid baggage tag, for some reason it had not been recorded in their system and so they had no record of her suitcase anywhere. They would keep looking, he told her, but she might prefer to just submit for reimbursement.

As it turns out, Jennifer is an extraordinarily organized person and she had a complete list of everything that was in the missing suitcase, which she promptly sent in to the airline.

But after she sent it she spent some time looking at the list and thinking about some of the things that were now missing, and an odd thought popped into her head: “Maybe God is telling me something here.” The reason this thought went through her head is that the entire incident took place not long after her divorce was finalized, and many of the things in her baggage were baggage themselves. The Kate Spade purse her ex-husband had given her, the black dress she had bought for their third date, a necklace they had bought while on vacation. Even the suitcase itself had been purchased for their honeymoon.

So given what was missing and the timing of their loss, Jennifer felt that God might be telling her something. Maybe God was giving her a sign about literally leaving her old baggage behind. The more she thought about it, the less interested she was in getting it all back. She convinced herself that this was a great way to begin this new phase in her life unencumbered by old baggage.

And it worked. She really was just as happy without it -maybe happier. So imagine her surprise when, the day after Rosh Hashanah last year, the airline delivered her bag to her apartment in Chicago. Amazingly, every single item was there.

Now the question was: what should she do with these things? She says that the suitcase sat fully packed on her living room floor for seven days. She couldn’t make up her mind what to do with it. She had made peace with the idea that she

was better off without most of these things. Would unpacking them weaken her resolve?

Right before Yom Kippur, she decided she had to unpack the suitcase, because you can't just leave a piece of your past in the middle of your living room floor. But in the end she decided to give away all of the items that also carried emotional baggage. In the end, she chose to enter the New Year as free of her old baggage as possible.

Even without a lost suitcase, I think that we, too, need to make that kind of a decision as the New Year begins. We have to decide what we are going to take with us into 5776, and what we are going to leave behind:

That perceived slight that we received? That friend whose action hurt us deeply? The disappointment we felt when someone got the promotion that we wanted so much? All of the past pains and hurts and angers and disappointments? Let's leave them behind, and not carry them with us into the New Year. What good will they do us if we take them along? They will only weigh us down, and make next year's journey that much more difficult.

But what about the *shehecheyanu* moments from this past year, the moment when things just went right? The moment when we laughed so hard that our sides hurt? The moment when our child or grandchild brought home a report card that made us proud? The moment when we learned a new skill, or how to make a new recipe, or how to fix something we never thought we could? The moment when we felt appreciated and understood and really valued by someone important in our life? These are the moments we should make sure to pack and carry with us into the New Year. These are the memories that will lighten our load and give us joy and confidence as we walk into the unknown future.

Let us choose carefully what to take and what to leave behind as the New Year begins. May our baggage be light so that we journey forward into 5776 with a spring in our step and joy, confidence and love in our hearts.

Amen.