

Shana Tova. My name is Sharon Salwen. My husband Jon, and our children Ben and Alli have been members of Kahal Braira for 6 years and I am glad that you have chosen to celebrate with us this Rosh Hashana.

Shana Tova. That is what Jews traditionally say at this time of year. Shana Tova – As a greeting or when we say good-bye, the salutation is Shana Tova – A Good Year. Not Shana Samaach (A Happy Year) or a Prosperous Year or a Charitable Year, not even Shana shel Shalom (A Year of Peace). For as long as I can remember, I have almost reflexively made this phrase a part of my conversations on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippor. It was only when I started to think about greeting you this morning that I began to wonder about this choice of words.

“A Good Year”. Good (and I assume the Hebrew – Tov) is usually considered a pretty nondescript word. Pity the naïve college, high school, or even middle school student who uses “good” in a school essay. For sure, that word screams to be circled by a red pen, with the circle attached to an arrow pointing to a comment in the margin strongly suggesting that the writer immediately consult the thesaurus on their word-processor.

But, perhaps at this start of a New Year, it is precisely the ambiguous quality of this expression that gives it its greatest meaning. When we wish each other a Good Year, we convey our positive wishes, but do not impose any specific expectations regarding what we believe constitutes a Good Year. Each of us must decide for ourselves how we will think and how we will act in order to create a Shana Tova.

Rather than conveying an innocuously hopeful or even mundane message, each Rosh Hashana, these words remind us of our individual ethical responsibility to make choices that support what each of us regard as a "Good Year".

I was reminded of both the exhilarating opportunities and challenging dilemmas inherent in these choices earlier this month when I was sorting through a bookshelf and came across a book that had been a favorite when my children were younger. The book is called *The Big Orange Splot*, and it was written by Daniel Pinkwater. In a short aside, Daniel Pinkwater is the son of Polish Jewish émigrés who has publicly described his father as a "ham-eating iconoclastic Jew". I will summarize the plot for those of you who don't know the story.

The main character, Mr. Plumbean, lives on a "neat street" whose inhabitants are all pleased that all the houses look exactly alike. When a seagull flies over Mr. Plumbean's house and serendipitously drops a can of bright orange paint on his roof, Mr. Plumbean takes the opportunity to incorporate this Big Orange Splot into massive home renovation project. He paints his house to look like a rainbow, a jungle, and an explosion. He includes pictures of elephants, lions, pretty girls and steamshovels. He plants his favorite plants, installs a hammock, and gets himself an alligator as a pet. In fact, he tells us that he has constructed his house so that it epitomized all of his dreams. His neighbors come to house to question his actions and to berate him for his choices, insisting that he has (and I quote here) "popped his cork, flipped his wig, gushed his mush and slipped his hawser". But, after each person spends time with Mr.

Plumbean, they go back to their own homes having made a choice to paint their houses to look like each of their dreams. At the end of the story, all the residents respond to passer-bys' comments about the haphazard – even chaotic design of their neighborhood by explaining, "Our street is us and we are it. Our street is where we like to be, and it looks like all our dreams." I used to tell my children that I thought Mr. Plumbean and his neighbors were both lucky and brave.

In the coming year, it is likely that we will all confront situations where we will be required to make important choices. Sometimes we will be able to anticipate these circumstances and have the opportunity to carefully consider and plan our decisions. Other times, more unexpected, even random events (like the can of orange paint that dropped on Mr. Plumbean's roof) will demand that we make more spontaneous choices. Sometimes our choices will be congruent with those of other people, and we will feel authentically "at home on that street". Other times, our dreams and values will demand that we build something unique – a house that is different from everyone else's. These can be the more difficult choices because they sometimes leave us vulnerable to derision. But when we say or do something that reflects our beliefs, that choice ultimately feels both sincere and creative.

The ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippor are called the Days of Awe. In contemporary Jewish thought, this is thought of as a time for introspection; a time to time to reflect on our past behavior and renew our commitment to our highest values. It is a time of to think about the choices we made over the past year and to

resolve to ourselves that we will try to make what we each believe are good choices in the coming year. As we sit here as part of Kahal Braira – which means Community of Choice -we have the obligation and the opportunity to consider the possibilities available for each of us individually in the coming year. As daunting as that may sometimes seem, it is also invigorating because as Stephen Mitchell (a psychoanalytic theorist whose work I admire) wrote, “Constructive creative living necessitates continual choice.” So to each of you, as you construct your life in the coming year, I wish you Shana Tova - your own Good Year.

Sharon Zimmerman Salwen

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