Shanah Tovah!
All right, pop quiz. Who is the greatest scientist / mathematician depicted in cinema history?
Don't answer!
Because there is one correct answer. And that is, Dr. Ian Malcolm, played by Jeff Goldblum in Jurassic Park.
"Life, uh, finds a way."
You remember him, right? Here's a picture to jog your memory.
"Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn't stop to think if they should."
In addition to predicting – correctly! – that the dinosaurs would break free, Dr. Malcolm also described for a generation of cinema-goers the idea of what he called, "chaos theory."
What is chaos theory? At least according to Dr. Malcolm, and 1990s pop culture – so all you sophisticated people, don't come for me, because I'm talking about pop culture, not math – "the shorthand is the, the butterfly effect. A butterfly can flap its wings in Peking and in Central Park you get rain instead of sunshine."
Maybe you have heard this phrase before – "the butterfly effect." Chaos theory, which is apparently better called "complexity theory," is about how there are so many variables in the world that it is impossible to accurately model the world. "The butterfly effect" takes its name from the idea that a seagull flapping its wings might affect the generation and eventually the path of a storm.
This idea has entered into the popular consciousness. Small things we do here, so it goes, might affect things on the other side of the world.
So let's try it. Because I'd like to affect things in all sorts of places around the world. Washington. Tel Aviv. Gaza. Jerusalem. Moscow. London. Beijing.
So let's flap our wings, and maybe that will cause some change.
Okay, what did we see? We hit our neighbors in the face. Look, you have a black eye.
I'm going to get serious for a minute. In our world today – and this has been going on for years – many of us are trying very hard to make the world far away better, and as we try to do so, we are smacking each other in the face, and actually making our world worse. And we think are so justified – we know we are – so we keep doing it, because, it can't hurt, right? But it often does.
It's not just us. All across the world, people are seeing other parts of the world, and trying to change things there, and thereby hitting each other in the face. And then, everyone thinks: the world is getting worse, look at all of these people hit in the face. I should flap my wings harder.
And we have to find a different way. The world is not getting any better, and is getting worse, despite our flapping, maybe because of our flapping, and our communities are getting worse, too.

The unintended consequences of so much of what we think is important political advocacy are actually damaging our world and making the real goals of that political advocacy harder to reach. We see this in American politics, and in the Israel discourse.

This is not just me and the estimable Dr. Malcolm. I want to take a minute to give a theoretical basis for what I am describing, which comes from Dr. Eitan Hersh, political science professor at Tufts and brother of a Conservative rabbi. In his book, "Politics is For Power," Hersh describes something he refers to as "political hobbyism," which is "all the ways we do politics to serve our own emotional or intellectual needs rather than to do power-seeking organized behavior." Political hobbyism describes both obsessive following of politics, like being in a fandom or supporting a sports team, and performative ways of engaging in those politics that might feel good, but don't actually do the work you want them to do. That don't actually help your team.

Now, I would like to summarize his whole book here for you, but I'm not going to do that. We should bring him out for a visit and you should read the book. He wrote it in 2019, and its arguments, backed up with data – that political hobbyism is more pervasive on the left than the right, more pervasive among college-educated and boomers, that the temptation for a solely emotivist or performative politics is one that is actually destructive to causes, and that real change is encountered by unglamorous but important tasks, like running for office, showing up at meetings, and building relationships with people you disagree with so that they might find room in your politics – have been born out in the years since the book's publication. I will say, though, that his book is not pessimistic – it just insists, extremely persuasively, that if we want to be successful in our politics – which is the art of changing society – then we need to avoid the hobbyism trap that is so easy for us, specifically in a world of social media.

We humans have a natural desire to perform – that is, to publicly express – aspects of our identity. That is not a bad thing, and is in fact important. But it has been supercharged in the world of social media, where you can perform in front of many people and receive likes for it. It has also become a type of magical thinking, apotropaic or theurgic, in which we think that self-expression is the royal road to political change when, in fact, political change comes by seeing other people and forming relationships with them over time. Hersh is not promoting quietism – he is promoting effective social change, and arguing against ineffective social change that masquerades to us as effective.

This spring I took a class from the Rabbinical Assembly with an experienced mediator on the topic of "Facilitating Difficult Conversations" in your community. The subtext was Israel, but it applies to so many things. I want to share some things I learned that I think are deeply important for us. The teacher told us that she does not speak about conflict resolution – she focuses on conflict resiliency. I'll share more about her teaching tomorrow morning.

In the class, nearly every rabbi shared stories about congregants of varying political stripes acting out against each other and against the rabbi. That is unfortunately common in our

world these days. But most interestingly, multiple rabbis reported a dynamic in their synagogues where congregants would threaten to resign unless the rabbi punished congregants on the other side of the aisle. That is, the congregant is not simply looking for representation of their own views, but is looking for their "opponent" congregant to be rebuked or removed from the synagogue.

That bad behavior existed, in these rabbis' tellings, among people on both the "left" and the "right." To be honest, we have not had this happen at BEKI, but it's not unimaginable. On Yom Kippur we talk about our sins, and we do it in the first person plural – we have done this – in order to cause us to reflect, and also realize that none of us is perfect. I think we can all appreciate ways we do this and can be better about this issue.

But I want to speak specifically about why this is bad, the insisting the rabbi punish the "other side." It's not just that it's divisive, or that I don't think is in line with Jewish values of disagreement, although that is all true. What I specifically think is a problem is that it displaces some ill-feeling that you have about something in your life, hands it to the rabbi, and says, "well, solved that problem." I don't have to do any spiritual work here – that's for the rabbi to do.

In leadership parlance, this is what is known as "work avoidance." Work avoidance is when we engage in displacement, projection, performance, or perseveration, to avoid dealing with an actual problem in our life. Often, those actual problems are not ones we can solve, but problems that require the spiritual wisdom and equanimity to tell the difference between things I can change and things I must accept.

Let's go back to the problem the rabbis in my group mentioned. What is interesting to me is that demanding that another congregant who makes you crazy be punished by the rabbi is a form of work avoidance. The work that is being avoided is the relationship work with the other person who is driving you crazy. The way it is being avoided is saying, "This is a rabbi problem – not a 'me' problem."

I get that. When there is a person who is driving me crazy, I don't want to do relationship work with them, either. But displacing that work onto something external – can't so-and-so do something about this – is not good. Because it makes us think we are doing the work, when we are not, and it creates a culture of not owning problems ourselves. That's why I try to push back on this all the time when it comes up.

The proper rabbinic mode – or proper therapeutic mode – is to help people realize that their problems are their problems, and only they can solve it. Often, in synagogue systems, rabbis, or "the community," or "the president," or "the board," imagined as a character, become a focus of work avoidance. It is what they do that matters – I don't need to change or grow.

Do you see the parallel to the performative political hobbyism I described earlier? That, too, is a form of work avoidance. We have to do the work. There is no pin I can wear nor article I can share that will do the work for me. One of the reasons I brought up the Eitan Hersh book is in order to set aside the argument, "but we must make change; if not now,

when?" Because what he raises in a very thorough way is that, often we think we are making change, when we are really just celebrating ourselves, and we are actually setting our causes back. And look at how many causes you are pursuing, and how they are doing in this world. I suspect he is right.

By the way, we do this in our personal lives *all the time*. It is our tendency to externalize our spiritual work, or our relationship work, instead of realizing that it is precisely we, I, who need to do this work. One example I see often is parents who have a problem with their child – maybe about the person they are in a relationship with, or something else – my goal in these conversations is to prevent displacement onto the rabbi and put the focus on the person. They, not I, are the ones who can fix the relationship. The people who have the problem are the ones who can fix it.

This is the work of Teshuvah, the self-change that we are supposed to engage in throughout the year, and that we celebrate on Yom Kippur.

Maimonides writes, in the Guide for the Perplexed, about the Yom Kippur scapegoat ritual we will read about tomorrow:

"The goat [of the Day of Atonement] that was sent [into the wilderness] (Lev. 16:20, seq.) served as an atonement for all serious transgressions more than any other sin-offering of the congregation. … **There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being.**"

That is – you have to do your own teshuvah work. Not a rabbi, not a synagogue president, nor even a goat, can do it for you.

Let's look at the the Talmud – Sotah 40a. The setting -- imagine you are in services and listening to the shaliach tzibur, the prayer leader, recite the repetition of the Amidah. You get to a section called "modim," "gratitude," and a bunch of people do this little half-bow in their seats, and mumble something. What is going on? Here's the Talmud explaining it to us. **While the prayer leader is reciting** the blessing of: **We give thanks, what do the people say? Rav says** that they say: **We give thanks to You, Lord our God, for** the merit of **giving thanks to You. And Shmuel says** that one should say: **God of all** living **flesh, for** the merit of **giving thanks to You. Rabbi Simai says** that one should say: **Our Creator, Who created** everything **in the beginning, for** the merit of **giving thanks to You.** The Sages **of Neharde'a say in the name of Rabbi Simai** that one should say: We offer **blessings and praises to Your great name, for You have given us life and sustained us, for giving thanks to You. Rav Aḥa bar Ya'akov** would **finish** the blessing **as follows: So may You give us life, and show us favor, and collect us, and gather our exiles into Your sacred courtyards, in order to observe Your laws and to fulfill Your will wholeheartedly, for giving thanks to You. Rav Pappa said:** These Sages each added a different element to the prayer. **Therefore, we should** combine them together and **recite all of them.**

As we say, two Jews, three opinions, but here, it's really five Jews, five opinions, and they all compromise, and that's why the service is so long.

The meaning of this text is not hidden. What are we supposed to do when the prayer leader

speaks of gratitude? We are supposed to give thanks ourselves, individually. That is: you have to do the work yourself. I can't be grateful for you – you have to do it yourself.

This is not only a text about gratitude – it really is a text about prayer, about tefilah. You have to do it yourself. A leader cannot do it for you. One of my teachers, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, once said that the surefire way to get nothing out of prayer is to come to synagogue, sit back, and say, "inspire me." You have to engage yourself.

I'll give a ritual example. When we remove the Torah scroll from the ark, we proceed around the room. We have a custom of kissing the Torah, and a custom of turning to face the Torah. Where does this come from? I have an answer. In the Shulchan Arukh, the code of Jewish Law from the 1500s, Rabbi Moses Isserles writes of the custom among Ashkenazic Jews to kiss the Torah.

"We bring children forward to kiss the Torah, in order to educate and excite them about mitzvot."

שמביאים התינוקות לנשק התורה, כדי לחנכם ולזרזם במצות

He teaches this in the name of the Or Zarua, Rabbi Isaac ben Moshe, who lived in the 1200s in Vienna.

So first, this custom dates back at least to the 1200s. I want to go back to what I said on Rosh Hashanah, that we are engaged in a long project of Torah. This small custom has survived everything that has happened to the Jewish people in the last 1000 years. It survived, because we keep doing it.

But second, I want to talk about my experience carrying the Torah scroll around. I want to celebrate every person here, and especially to make Torah accessible to people who might find it far away. Some people have mobility challenges, and I'll lean down and bring the Torah to them. But really, you should come to the Torah, not the other way around. Most often, the Torah moves in a circle, and people expect it to come to them. Really, you should go to the Torah. Maybe you'll have to get up and move around.

Partially this is an issue of respect for the Torah – we don't make the Torah come to us, we go to the Torah. But for me, here, it's really something symbolic of what I've been talking about. Namely, we are the ones who have to do the work of Torah. Not the person carrying it, not the Torah scroll itself, but you, you have to be the one to do this. We each have to be responsible for achieving the closeness to Torah that we seek. It cannot be done by proxy.

I've spoken about Torah, tefilah, and teshuvah. Let's go to tzedakah. The work of bettering society.

I cannot do that work for you. Neither can a meme, or a clip from the Daily Show, or a Facebook post. Nor a sermon, nor a speech, nor a synagogue policy. Only you can make the changes in our world that we need to make.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about how, though there are many things outside of our control in this world, we – our behavior, our actions – are not outside of our control. Although I cannot change the texture of political disagreement in this country, it is in my power to take responsibility for how I express myself, and how I hear divergent

voices.

It is likewise within my power, and within your power, to take responsibility that you do not, in trying to affect the world and do tzedakah, harm your neighbor and harm your community. Because, as I mentioned earlier, this ends up impeding your goals, and also, is bad in itself.

I do not want to be responsible for the poor state of the Israel conversation in American Judaism. I do not want to be responsible for the American culture wars. But these problems are not problems that belong to someone else. They are problems that belong to me, and to each one of us. Every single one of us is responsible for raising the level of discourse, for minimizing harm that we cause through our passionate pursuit of causes, for building community even when it is diverse and sometimes annoying, and for recognizing that we are all created in the image of God and worthy of respect and love.

We all have to do better. We have to be mindful of the unintended consequences of even our well-intentioned behaviors. We have to treat each other kindly, and take responsibility when we do not, by apologizing.

Tonight is the beginning of Yom Kippur. It's a day of reflection on how we can behave better in the new year. It's a day on which we are forced to slow down and reflect on how we can change.

We all can do better on this measure in the new year. We all can hold ourselves responsible to build a community where we react to each other with empathy, with care, and with respect, even when we differ.

It is each of us who must do this work.

The hunger we feel when we are fasting – no one else can bear that hunger for you. It is a reminder, literally in your gut, that only you can change.

It is a pushback against the magical thinking of the butterfly effect. It is a bulwark against our tendency to outsource the problems of character, internality, and existence. For there is no one else who can live your life for you.

May we feel this with a sense of joy: a palpable sense of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility. You can actually improve this community in the next year, by turning, every time, toward empathy, care, and humility.

For Yom Kippur is the day when God turns to us, and says: I will treat you, yes even you, with empathy, care, and humility.

This year, may we live up to our best selves.