

What are you going to do for the world this year?

Erev Rosh Hashana 5775

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I'm going to tell you a story about a boy named Shlomo. Ever heard of him? Rabbi Aaron told us about him last night. Shlomo grew up in a town called Nineveh, the very same town we'll read about next week on Yom Kippur. Nineveh is famous for two reasons—first; it is one of the oldest cities in the world. Second is that a long time ago, when the Bible was first being written, Nineveh was a pretty awful place; people were horrible to each other. But then the prophet Jonah showed up and said: “If you guys don't clean up your act the whole city will be destroyed.” And guess what—the king (they had kings in those days) said: “Oo oh...if not now, when?” And he and all the people did clean up their act. So by the time Shlomo came along, Nineveh was a great place to live... no fighting, no bullying, no lying... just nice people being nice to each other.

But one day something weird happened. An outsider came to town and he was really mean to everyone. Suddenly Shlomo realized that the whole world was not like Nineveh. At that very moment Shlomo decided that he should go out into the world, just like Jonah had all those years ago, to tell people to turn from their evil ways, to stop being so mean and self-centered. After all, he figured, if not now, when?

This all happened right at this time of year, just as Rosh Hashana was coming up.

The first town he came upon was a dreary little place called Beverly Valley. It was pretty enough, but everyone seemed sad and grouchy. Nobody smiled. But since this town didn't get many visitors, when the kids heard there was a new kid in town they all came running into the town square to meet him. Shlomo asked them what they liked best about their town, but none of them could come up with anything good to say. It was boring, dull, nothing to do... they didn't even seem excited that soon it would be Rosh Hashana.

That gave Shlomo an idea. He remembered that Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world. He never really understood what that meant until now. I mean, what does it mean to say that Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world? The world doesn't eat cake or blow out candles, does it?

But, at that minute, he sort of got it; it is a way of saying it is the beginning of something new, a new year, new chances, and maybe even a time to say thank you for all the great presents that fill the world.

One time in school his class had celebrated Rosh Hashana with each kid picking a secret friend and giving that friend a present in honor of the birthday of the world. The only rule was you couldn't spend any money; you had to make the gift out of stuff you already had or could find. Shlomo remembered how much fun it was, to plan the gift, to leave little clues, and finally for the secret friend to discover the present and be so very happy and grateful.

So Shlomo told these kids from Beverly Valley about the birthday of the world, and suggested that everyone write down their names, put the names in a big box, and then everyone could pick the name of the

secret friends to make a present for. Everyone actually did just what he suggested and then went off to plan their gifts.

This one little girl Rachel wanted to make a very special gift for the friend whose name she pulled. She knew that Nathan LOVED his dog very much. He would always talk about his dog and have his mom bring his dog to school to pick him up. So Rachel thought, "I'm going to make him a frame to keep a picture of his dog with him all the time." So she took some sticks and cardboard, pasted them together and decorated the outside. She left room in the middle for a picture. And she was so proud of that frame.

Then, on Rosh Hashanah, right after synagogue, all of the kids got together to exchange their special gifts. But then something happened that really surprised Shalom. He watched as Rachel gave Nathan the picture frame she had made, but instead of being happy he threw it on the ground and said: "This is just junk! It is not a good present!" Rachel started to cry.

She thought that opening her present would make her feel better. But when she opened her gift from Ella, a colorful paper fan, Rachel pouted and said she didn't like the colors, and anyway it wasn't hot so she had no use for a fan.

This kept happening over and over. All the kids cried when the person who opened their gift hated it. And then they hated the gifts they got and that made other people cry!

No wonder why the town seemed so dreary even though it was pretty and everyone seemed to have enough to eat and nice places to play. The kids were unhappy because they didn't feel grateful.

Shlomo knew just what to do. "Hey Rachel,".... he instructed, "tell Nathan why you made that picture frame for him." So she turned to Nathan and said: "Well, Nathan- I know how much you love your dog and I thought you'd want a picture of him with you all the time. So I made you a picture frame."

"Oh" said Nathan. "That's really nice. I didn't know you put so much thought into the gift. That's really special." And he picked up the picture frame off the floor. Brushed it off, and even gave her a little hug!

And then Ella told Rachel why she made the fan. "I know how much you liked going to China last year. I thought this fan would remind you of your fun time with your family."

Once everyone went around and explained the meaning behind their gifts, they realized how special they all were. And that it was important to think about the other person... not just themselves when they were getting their gifts.

Then Shlomo said, "Alright guys... now there's one more gift we all have to give... and this one's for the world on its birthday. What are you going to do for the world this year? And if not now when?"

(Then we asked all the children and the adults to fill out an “If Not Now, When Will I.....” card and explained that they were setting an intention for the year. And that was the world’s birthday present.)