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**Congregation Kol Emeth**  
**Day Two Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2011**

Shanah Tovah.

For the first few days after our wedding, Aviv played, slightly uncomfortably, with his wedding ring. I was personally enjoying holding his hand and feeling the smooth band of gold around my new husband's finger, but it was clear that it would take some getting used to for him, if not emotionally than at least physically. When I kept asking him how it felt, Aviv finally answered that he liked the external reminder of his commitments as a husband, prompting him to live up to the promises on our ketubah.

Over the course of these conversations, Aviv became enamored of the idea of externally expressing his commitments. He went so far as to ask me - in what he thought was an off-hand manner - what I thought of him wearing tzitzit. I stipulated that maybe he should work on some of the most symbolic mitzvot in Jewish life, such as Shabbat and kashrut observance, before taking this step. I remembered my discomfort when a friend studying at HUC during my year in Jerusalem ate non-kosher hamburgers on chag days with his tzitzit gently blowing at his waist. Now obviously, Aviv's personal practice is far from this extreme, but I still hesitated at his suggestion of outwardly indicating a level of Jewish observance before it had truly concretized in his life. On the other hand, part of me felt eager for him to jump-start his mitzvah life with such a clear physical reminder of his spiritual commitments.

As I grappled with the tzitzit question, I realized the need for a working definition of the word commitment. According to the dictionary, a commitment is a pledge, promise, or obligation. (Example: I have just committed to the constructs of marriage.) It can also be an engagement or involvement (Example: I am recommitting to coming to minyan every Wednesday night.) Our tradition asks us to make commitments in many different forms, and affords us a sweet spiritual reward when we follow through. Making a commitment also marks a new start, a turning in a new direction, the beginning of a new cycle.

Hayom Harat Olam: Today is the birthday of the world. This is a major trope of Rosh Hashanah. We begin our cycle again, not only as individuals, but also within the mythos of our creation narrative. We honor the cosmic process of 6 days of creative action followed by the sweet seventh day of divine rest. Every Friday night in the Kiddush, the sacred words of Torah connect us back to that original inclination to pause and reflect on that which has been created:

<p>And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because on it God rested from all of God’s work, which God had created, to do, <i>la’asot</i>.</p>	<p>כִּי בּוֹ יִבְרַךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֹתוֹ: שָׁבַת מְקַל-מְלֵאכָתוֹ, אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת</p>
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(Genesis 2:3)

“*Asher bara elohim la’asot.*” That God had created, to do. *La’asot*. Many readers over time have noticed that the final word in this verse, *la’asot*, seems either out of place or extraneous. “And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because on it God rested from all of God’s work which God had created, to do – *la’asot*.” What is this word doing there? Perhaps one answer comes from the greater context of the verse. We are in the version of the creation story in which humanity, under the umbrella of *adam*, is created last, right before Shabbat. In this wonderful biblical moment, divinity turns to humanity and says, this – creation- is for you to do. God has purposefully created an incomplete world, and even at the moment of Shabbas, God encourages and invites humanity to enter into partnership and *la’asot*, do the work of creation.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the day the world was born, we re-create our inner worlds and re-commit to being God’s partners. We often associate prayer with the opportunity to ask what God will do for us. But we must also ask ourselves today: what are we doing for God? What are we doing for the world? How are we living our commitment of *la’asot*?

Two men were once walking down the road after shul. One man asked the other: Why is there so much suffering, hunger, and poverty in the world? The second man asked him: Why don’t you ask God? The first man paused and responded: Because I’m afraid God will ask me that

same question. Today, I want you to imagine that God is asking you a version of that question: What commitments will you make, *la'asot*, and how will you ensure that they are carried through?

Rabbi Brad Artson, dean of my alma mater, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, often returns to the idea that our commitments ripple through concentric circles. Our loyalties begin with our closest circles of partners and family and expand through our circles of fellowship to the Jewish community, the human community, and the entire world. In the Responsive Classroom methodology that our Religious School has adopted, there are 3 school rules: Take care of yourself, Take care of others, and Take care of the materials in your surroundings. Our tradition catches on to this pattern as well. The Talmudic rabbis categorize all mitzvot into three areas: *mitzvot bein adam l'atzmo*, *bein adam l'chavero*, and *bein adam l'makom*. We must make a commitment to self, a commitment to others, and a commitment to the world around us. As we unpack each of these areas, I invite you to consider which realm your commitments will fall within for this New Year.

First, take care of yourself. *La'asot mitzvot bein adam l'atzmo*. The commitment to self is in fact way more spiritually important than a simple new years resolution. As Oprah says, living your best life is the foremost way to impact the world around you. Going to the gym could be a way towards ego-centric weight loss, simply a concession to the body- obsession of Hollywood and the media. But it can also be a path towards deeper radiant health, giving our families peace of mind about our longevity and physical safety as we age. It can be a tool to release endorphins, leaving us in a better mood and therefore interacting in a more positive, patient manner with both loved ones and strangers. It can give us the inner confidence and discipline to deal with the true trials and tribulations of life, allowing equanimity to triumph over anxiety. Fulfilling mitzvot *bein adam l'atzmo*, the commandments and commitments of taking care of ourselves, gives us the inner strength to shine outward, *la'asot*, and rise to the challenge of completing our corner of creation. Our highest self is our committed self. So ask yourself: what commitment can I make to myself this year that will, in turn, positively impact the greater world?

*Mitzvot bein adam l'chavero*, taking care of others. These are the commandments between a person and her companions, the commitments we make to others. As Rabbi Artson would have us note, there are certainly many circles of “others” in each of our lives. Many of us are careful to offer special words and actions to our loved ones, communicating our emotional commitments to those in our most intimate circles. But this category of commitment also applies to the wider community. When we enter the covenant of *kehillah*, it is unlikely that we will feel connected to every member in our community, nor will we always want to set the group’s needs above our own. Synagogue is the perfect example. If you are honest with yourself, you will probably admit that you haven’t felt connected every single moment of today’s service. You might have taken a break, walked around this beautiful campus, even hung out by the playground for a few minutes just to get out of the intensity of the sanctuary. But the moments when we are all here together, when each of us “Shows Up” are the most powerful parts of our service. And if you have been in mourning, you can attest that the daily minyan is proportionally resonant in relation to the numbers in our quorum. According to our congregational survey, only about 10% of Kol Emeth’s members have ever attended a daily minyan, but those who have come know that supporting fellow Jews by saying Amen to their Kaddish is one of the most impactful expressions of commitment that we can show to our community. There is a *la’asot*, a gift of allowing others to complete and fulfill their own deeper spiritual needs, even when it is inconvenient for us. Maybe your *la’asot* happens not when you walk through the doors of the synagogue, but when you walk through the door of another’s home. Perhaps your way of completing creation is to visit or cook for an infirmed congregant under the auspices of the Chesed Committee, or to offer rides to shul for those in our community who would have no other way to join us. Perhaps you open your own doors and host a Shabbat dinner or a Sukkot ice cream party as part of our Hospitality Initiative. When each of us finds and commits to our own *la’asot*, the whole becomes holy in a way previously unimaginable. So ask yourself now: what commitment will you make to our community this year?

So we arrive at the third classroom rule, the third category of mitzvot: *Mitzvot bein Adam l'Makom*, the commitment to take care of your surroundings. There is a double entendre here- *makom* literally means place. On Sukkot, when we shake the lulav to symbolize that godliness fills our space, that the Shechinah or Divine Presence rests amongst us, we

understand God as HaMakom- The Place. So *mitzvot bein adam l'Makom* are really commitments between each of us and God. Not all of us have a clear connection to God, and yet here we are, drawn to shul on Rosh Hashanah, engaged in the words of our tradition and the poetry of the *tefillot*. But let me suggest that it is precisely through the process of prayer that we take care of God. The word *tefillah* comes from the verb *l'hitpallel*, to judge oneself or to reflect on one's life. And the High Holiday prayerbook is named the *machzor*, from the verb *lach'zor*, to return, to cycle, to repeat. There is something very powerful about returning to shul, year after year, page after page, returning to the prayers of our people and reflecting on our own deepest truths.

Hayom Harat Olam- today we celebrate the cycle of creation, we relish the potential to create ourselves anew. We recommit to our higher selves, our more godly selves, and in turn ask God to recommit to us. *Avinu malkeinu*, we beg God, *aseh imanu tzedakah v'chesed v'hoshienu*, do justice and kindness with us, and lead us to a higher place, a place of salvation. In prayer, we tell ourselves and tell God what our *la'asot* is- what we will do in order to uphold our end of the covenant. And we remember that moment of commitment, that kernel of truth in which we deeply know and love our highest potential. Today, as our world is reborn, we stand again under the chuppah with God.

And God returns to us today, recommitting even when we have reneged. We have broken our commitments, dodged our end of the deal, and yet today, we cycle back to the moment of promise. A story was told by a great rebbe: A couple that has been growing apart finally decides to separate. One day, the husband opens the door to walk out of the relationship for good. But right outside, an organ grinder is playing the song from their wedding. They both remember how much they used to love each other, and decide to give their marriage another try. Said the rebbe, "This is what happens on Rosh Hashanah. We have had a difficult year. God has disappointed us, hasn't given us what we needed. And we have disappointed God. Over the year we have grown apart. Our values are different than they once were. We have so little to say to each other. On Rosh Hashanah we come to shul and are inclined to say to God: you know, maybe this isn't working out. Maybe we should go our separate ways. And just as we are thinking of saying that, we hear those familiar High Holiday melodies. We hear the sound of the Shofar, the music that was played when God and the people Israel entered into a

covenant with each other at Sinai. And when we hear that music we remember how we used to feel towards each other once upon a time. And we say, let's give it one more chance."

So let me return to Aviv and his wedding ring. Perhaps he has a point. External symbols do help us stay true to our commitments. I am often a more careful driver when I have a bumper sticker that alludes to a particular cause on my car, for fear that I will give a bad rap to the very belief that I am publicly espousing. For my new husband, as well as - I'm sure - many of us, the extra nudge to act like a *mentsch* is worth the strange physical sensation. It helps us keep perspective, be kinder in our judgments of others, and remind ourselves of our higher potential.

I want to challenge us today, to really examine our commitments. Ask yourself who and what you will take care of this year, what mitzvot will become your dearest and deepest commitments. I encourage you to verbalize these commitments to another person in this room today or to a friend or family member when you get home. Express it out loud, speak your commitment *la'asot*- to really do it. If you aren't ready today, take this next week to soul-search and make a commitment before Yom Kippur. Decide what will be your wedding ring, your tzitzit, your external reminder of this covenant. Allow yourself to commit. Allow yourself to pray, to remember, and to hold yourself accountable *la'asot*- to complete your part of creation, by showing up to your commitments.

I'd like us to sing together now, the niggun that Amy led us in a few minutes ago, this time with the words:

*Hashiveinu adonai eleicha v'nashuva*- Turn us towards You, God and we will return.

*Chadesh yameinu k'kedem*. – Renew our days as if we were beginning again.

Shanah Tovah.