

ROSH HASHANAH 1ST DAY 5768
Rabbi Mark Hillel Kunis

It's Rosh Hashanah! We made it through another year. Rosh Hashanah is the time to evaluate our lives and the year that has passed. So let's do some of that now. How many of you have had the most amazing year of your life? Not too many. How many of you fulfilled all of your goals and dreams for the year? Not too many. And how many of you experienced some frustration with your relationships, your work, or your health?

Since it's clearly the latter for most of us—myself included—let's talk about some of those frustrations today on Rosh Hashanah—about our hopes and dreams that remain unfulfilled, incomplete—and about how making more room for Gd in our lives can help.

1st let me tell you how I came to this topic. It all started about 4 weeks ago. I was feeling really frustrated with our building project and fell asleep watching television one night. When I awoke a couple of hours later there was this minister (Joel Osteen) preaching, and I was sure he was preaching directly to me. I pinched myself to make sure it wasn't a dream. Considering the deep frustrations I have experienced these past few years, and despite the New Testament sources he quoted, the core of his message was so powerful: "Gd wants to finish what He started in your life." [Repeat] Now that's a message that I needed to hear. I quickly reached for a pen and wrote it down before I fell back asleep for I knew then that I must speak about it today—for my sake and for yours.

Think about it. We all have incompletions in our lives: dreams that have not yet come to pass, promises that are unfulfilled—in our health, our finances, our family. Maybe we have a child that's gotten off course. Or maybe we have a dream to get out of debt, a dream to buy a new home, a dream to start a new business. We've been praying and hoping, but it's been so long, and we're tempted to think that it's never going to happen. There are often many obstacles life puts in our path. Sometimes it seems that every time we try to go forward something comes up to block us. I've certainly felt that way this year. And all these disappointments, these setbacks are so frustrating that we begin to think that maybe it's not going to happen to me.

Sometimes we try to force the issue in all the wrong ways. Let me illustrate with a story about a Mafia godfather who learns that his bookkeeper has

embezzled \$10 million. The bookkeeper was deaf and that was the reason he got the job in the 1st place. It was assumed that a deaf bookkeeper would not be able to hear anything that he'd ever have to testify about in court. So, when the godfather interrogates the bookkeeper about the missing \$10 million, he brings along an attorney who knows sign language.

The godfather asks the bookkeeper, "Where's the \$10 million you embezzled from me?"

The attorney, using sign language, asks the bookkeeper who signs back, "I don't know what you are talking about."

The attorney tells the godfather, "He says he doesn't know what you're talking about."

The godfather pulls out a 9mm pistol, puts it to the bookkeeper's temple, cocks it and says, "Ask him again!"

The attorney signs to the bookkeeper, "He'll kill you for sure if you don't tell him!"

The bookkeeper signs back, "Okay! You win! The money is in a brown suitcase, buried behind the shed in my cousin Enzo's backyard in Queens!"

The godfather asks the attorney, "Well, what'd he say?"

The attorney replies, "He says you don't have the guts to pull the trigger!"

Yes, sometimes we try to bring about our dreams in all the wrong ways. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, I want to encourage you and me to believe that the dreams Gd puts in our hearts can and will come true. It says it right there in Psalm 145—the *Ashrey* prayer we just recited: *R'tzon y'reyav ya-aseh, v'et shavatam yishma v'yoshi-eym*, "[Gd] will do the will of those that revere Him, and He will hear their cry and save them." The Chassidic master, the Maggid of Mezritch, teaches that it's not always good for Gd to fulfill every desire a person wishes for, because some things might not be good for you. Therefore, the greatest kindness Gd can perform is to create proper and worthy desires in your heart. He then explains the word in our verse *ya-aseh*, not "to do the will" but its other meaning, "to make the will." In other words: "[Gd] will make the will," He will put in our hearts things to pray and yearn for that will be good for us, and then "He will hear our cry and make it happen."

The message is so powerful and so needed, especially on Rosh Hashanah: Anything Gd begins, any dream he puts in your heart—the good news is—if Gd started it, He's well able to finish it. It may not look like it's going to happen. It may take a long time. But if you'll keep your hopes up, if you

remain one who is *y'reyav*, one who keeps his faith, Gd promises He will complete your incompletions.

I want you today—on Rosh Hashanah—to envision that. You may have a dream to get married. It's been a long time. You've been through other relationships that didn't work out. You're tempted to think, "Well, I guess this is just not for me. I don't think I'll ever meet anybody." You've got to keep your hopes up. Gd still has someone great He wants to bring into your life.

Don't give in to despair—to the thought that, "My dreams will never work out." Deep down in here we have to be convinced that no matter how long it takes, no matter how impossible it looks, we must never give up on our dreams. As the Talmud teaches (*Makot* 10b): *B'derech sheh-adam rotzeh leyleych, ba molichin oto*, "In the direction a person wants to go, Gd will lead him." Gd will bring your dreams to completion.

Just ask Rick Ankiel. In his rookie year, 7 years ago, he was possibly the most phenomenal pitching prospect in baseball. He threw it by everyone—97 to 100 mph. He pitched the St. Louis Cardinals to a division title. Coach Tony La Russa then put him in the 1st playoff game against the Braves. What a position of honor for a 21-year-old. But it turned out to be a fatal exposure. His collapse was epic. He couldn't find the plate. In the 3rd inning he walked 4 batters, throwing 5 wild pitches before La Russa mercifully took him out of the game. Ankiel never recovered. He was demoted to the minor leagues and after 5 miserable years and injuries, he couldn't pitch anymore.

It would have been easy for Rick to get discouraged, thinking, "It's never going to happen. I might as well just accept the fact that I'm never going to play again in the majors." Just as some of us may think we're never going to be healthy. We've had that sickness for 10 years. Or, our business will never succeed.

The 1st place we lose the battle is in our own thinking. Rebbe Nachman teaches that beginning with Rosh Hashanah—for 10 days—is the time for us to think about what WE are doing to block our dreams and hopes. He would teach, *Mit Gut, alles iz meglach*, "With Gd everything is possible." So get rid of your negative thoughts and every day envision your dreams fulfilled.

And that's what Rick Ankiel did. Not for weeks, not for months, but year after year—hoping, praying, expecting one day he'll make it back to the majors. He held on to his vision of playing again for the Cardinals. Last month, on August 9th, Rick was back to a standing ovation at Busch Stadium—not on the pitcher's mound as before—but as the Cardinal's starting right fielder! In the 7th inning, with 2 outs, he hit a 3-run homer to win the game. 2 days later, he hit 2 homers and made one of the great catches of the year over the shoulder with his back to the plate. He said: "I set a goal for myself to get back here, and I never gave up on it." Because Rick dared to believe, refused to give up, he never lost faith that he could fulfill his dream.

I want us today to have a new determination to hold on to everything that Gd has put in our hearts. It doesn't matter how long it's been, Gd can still bring it to pass. Some of us today—myself included—need to get a new fire ignited within us. We've worked so hard for 3 years to have success with our new shule building. Many of us have become discouraged. There have been times when some of us have just about given up.

In our personal lives, how many of us have given up on a dream? How many gave up on a child? Maybe you're tempted to give up on the thought that you could achieve financial success. You need to draw that line in the sand and say: "Today is a new day, a New Year! I'm going to go out each day this year believing and expecting that every promise Gd put in my heart will come to pass."

This is what Joseph did. Gd put a dream in his heart that one day he would do great things and be the leader. But Joseph's life went in just the opposite direction. Everything that could go wrong did. He was sold into slavery, mistreated, lied about, and imprisoned. If anyone had a reason to give up, it would have been Joseph. He could have said, "Gd, I thought you put a dream in my heart, but I must not have understood it because the whole bottom has fallen out." But through it all, Joseph never lost faith. He held on to the belief that Gd was always with him—no matter what. And in the end, after 13 lonely years of struggle, because he kept his faith, he saw Gd bring to completion exactly what he had dreamt. And, my friends, Gd wants to do the same thing for each one of us.

What Gd is saying to us on Rosh Hashanah as we look to the New Year is: *Mit Gut, alles iz meglach*, "With Gd everything is possible. So don't give up hope. Remember, I am a Gd of completion. I finish what I start. If you'll get your

hopes up and start believing in yourself and in Me again, I'll do for you what I did for Joseph."

Sometimes life tests us, trying to get us to give up. It didn't work out. You didn't get the promotion. You didn't qualify for the new home. It's never going to happen. Just forget it! Time, on the other end, is pulling. It's been so long. And we hear all the negative voices: You don't have what it takes; the doctor's report says you're not going to make it. But if you're going to fulfill your destiny you must have the attitude that nothing is going to cause me to give up.

We see it in the Torah portions for Rosh Hashanah. Abraham was promised by Gd (Gen. 15:4): *ki im asher yeytzei mimeyecha, hu yirashecha*, "Only him that shall come forth from within you shall inherit you." He then waited 20 years to see his promise fulfilled. I'm sure there were many mornings he thought, "I must not have heard Gd right. It's never going to happen. Besides Sarah and I are too old to have a child." But he shook off his doubt and never gave up. That's what the Torah means when it says (Gen. 15:6): *V'he-emin baHashem, vayach-sh'vecha lo tzedaka*, "And [Abraham] believed in Gd and praised His righteousness that Gd will keep His promises." (following the Ramban)

The only thing that can block the dreams Gd puts in us, teaches Rebbe Nachman, is our negativity, when we quit believing that it's going to happen. It may seem impossible—like Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age—but Gd can make a way even when it looks like there is no way! [Repeat]

This year the DVD and book, "The Secret," by Rhonda Byrne, was all the rage. It touts the ancient "Law of Attraction," used by the greats of history, it teaches, "To achieve any goal, to turn adversity into success...tap the hidden reservoir of energy all around us...Our feelings and thoughts attract real events in the world into our lives." It's a sound spiritual principle—although I think it was a bit over done in the movie and book—that essentially teaches, you have to create the spiritual reality of something in your mind before it can manifest in the world.

Rosh Hashanah, according to the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 10b?), is not at time to confess our sins—that's for Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is a time to express our aspirations. It's a time to believe in ourselves again—something that is ironically far more challenging for many than believing in Gd. It's a

time to envision what our lives would be like if the desires or our hearts came to fruition. So today on Rosh Hashanah, let's envision anew our aspirations. The child you're praying for, see her life turned around. The troubled relationships you're experiencing, see it turned around. The business that's slow, see it successful.

You might say, "I don't know if this will happen for me. I've had a lot of setbacks. I didn't get the promotion I wanted last year. The doctor told me he didn't know if I'd make it." No, it's not going to happen with that kind of attitude! The real "secret" is that you've got to keep your hopes up and have faith deep down in here that it's not over until Gd says it's over. It doesn't matter how long it's been or how many obstacles you've had, Gd finishes what He started in you.

I heard the story about a young, African-American boy. He grew up extremely poor in the projects. He had no chance for a good life—no education, no money, no future. His father abandoned him and he was raised by a single mom who had to work 2 or 3 jobs just to make ends meet. There was no one in the home to give him guidance and direction, so he got involved in breaking into cars, stealing, running with the wrong crowd. One day, early in the morning, he was sneaking out the window of his room so he wouldn't have to go to school. His cousin Rita that was staying with them for a while caught him and said, "Oh go ahead and skip school. I won't tell anybody. It doesn't matter. Nobody in this family is ever going to be anything anyway. Nobody in this family ever has." (*By George*, George Foreman & Joel Engel, p.13)

That made him mad and he made up then and there to prove her wrong. It was like something popped inside him. Instead of getting bitter and letting those negative words take root. He saw it as a challenge. He joined the job core. One thing they offered was boxing. He went to the gym and told the head coach that he wanted to box. "You ever boxed before," he asked.

"Only on the street," he replied.

The coach rudely barked at him, "Don't waste my time kid. I've got all these experienced boxers to train."

As he was leaving the gym that day feeling dejected and discouraged, an assistant coach, Doc Broadus, called him over saying, "Hey kid, you come back tomorrow and I'll be your trainer." He gave him a brand new pair of boxing shoes. It was the 1st gift he ever received. To make a long story short: one year later George Foreman won the Olympic gold medal. He went on to become the heavy-weight champion of the world—twice!

The funny thing is that when that cousin who told him he would never amount to anything saw him win the gold medal, she came up to him later and said, “I always knew you could do it!”

My friends, don’t let people talk you out of your dreams. Don’t let rejection and disappointment cause you to feel inferior. Put your shoulders back because, as the Torah teaches, *Banim atem laHashem Elokeychem*, “You are children of the Hashem your Gd!”

I’m asking you today, on Rosh Hashanah to make a deal with Gd. Believe that your best days are still in front of you. Expect good things. Too often we settle saying, “Gd I once believed that you wanted me to prosper. But I get so frustrated at times. I’ll just find a way to live with things the way they are.” Now I realize that we need to be content, but Rosh Hashanah implores us, don’t settle for the way we are. Don’t give up on what Gd has put in your heart.

Abraham could have said, “Gd we have this other child, Ishmael, by our servant Hagar. It’s not exactly what you’ve promised, but it’s OK. We love him. He’s a son too.” Or, “Gd, I really wanted to get married but I’m getting kind of old, I guess I’ll just settle for being single. Nothing wrong with that.” No, keep that dream alive! Believe that Gd will finish what He started in you, and at the right time, He’ll bring that perfect person into your life.”

After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the 1st Temple in 586 BCE, he took the Jews into exile to Babylonia. Zerubavel, the last descendant from the lineage of King David, wanted desperately to return to Judea and rebuild the Temple. When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia and permitted him to return, he immediately laid the foundation. But the Samaritan people that the Babylonians had moved into the Holy Land didn’t want the Temple rebuilt and so they went to the lawyers and the judges with lies and deceit and got a decree halting construction.

This is what happens too many times. Gd puts a promise in our heart and all of our opponents come out of the woodwork to discourage us, to talk us out of it. Some of his own men said, “Zerubavel, we can’t do this. The task is too great.” And they just gave up. For 10 years there was no work done on the Temple. I can easily image the frustration in Zerubavel’s heart—week after week—walking by the property and seeing the empty foundation, the materials stacked up—the stone, the lumber. We can all relate to that—

passing our property on North Druid Hills, day after day, seeing the foundation and slab we had poured 2 years ago lying dormant.

Well 10 years later Gd sent the prophet Zachariah to Zerubavel (Zechariah 4:9) with this message: “The hand of Zerubavel laid the foundations of this Temple and his hands will complete it!” In other words: “Gd says, ‘Begin again.’”

All of a sudden something stirred inside him: “You mean Gd can still bring this to pass? Do you know how long it’s been? Do you know how many people are against me? Do you really think I can still do this?”

The prophet said, “I don’t think you can. I know you can. Gd says, ‘Get started.’”

We’re like Zerubavel. We laid the foundations. We were so excited, but things didn’t work out as we expected, and now we’ve been stalled for 2 years. Gd is saying to us as He said to Zerubavel, “You laid the foundation of Gd’s house and you will complete it! It’s time to start believing again—believe in yourselves and believe in Me. Start expecting good things now!”

Some of you, at one time believed you could overcome that addiction, but now it’s been so long you got comfortable where you are. Gd says, “Begin again!” Some of you wanted to buy a new home, but you didn’t qualify. That was 5 years ago. Gd says, “Begin again!” Gd is saying, “It’s not over until I say it’s over. Begin again.” Get a new vision for your dreams on Rosh Hashanah, urges the Talmud.

Zachariah told Zerubavel (4:7) to get an *even-harasha*, a cornerstone for the final piece of the Temple. Why was it important that he keep the cornerstone in front of him before the project was completed? Because every time he got tired, when he was down, when he thought it was impossible, he’d go over and look at that cornerstone. That was Gd saying to him, “I will complete it. I’ve got a plan. Just don’t give up.”

Do you have your cornerstone in front of you? Do you have something that represents the final piece of your dreams to remind you it will be complete? You can do the same thing. If you’re dreaming of a new home, why don’t you get a new brick? Get a key. Let it represent the finished product. You may have a dream to change your profession. Go out and get a little something that will represent the new work you’re hoping to do. It’s important that you keep something in front of you to see your dream completed. Here’s my cornerstone for our new building—a new *mezuzah* for the front door!

The 2nd thing Gd told Zerubavel was to speak positively when he saw that cornerstone saying, *cheyn cheyn la*. *Cheyn* means, “grace or favor.” *Cheyn, cheyn la* then means, “Bless it Gd with your favor. Let it happen!” Every day we need to say the same thing about our children, our health, our business, our finances. *Cheyn, cheyn la*, “Gd, let it happen!” When we say this we envision it completed and create the spiritual possibility of it happening.

Zerubavel wanted to believe the prophet, but there were all those obstacles and problems. The local zoning board had a 10-year block on the project. So Zachariah lifted him up with these words from Gd (4:6): “*Lo v'chayil, v'lo b'koach, ki im b'ruchi*, It's not by might; it's not by power; but it's by My spirit, says the Lrd of Hosts.” That word spirit—*ruach*—also means, “breath.” He was saying in effect, “It's not going to happen necessarily by our own ingenuity, or by our own wisdom, or even by our own strength, but by the breath of Gd.”

Gd breathed onto that 2nd Temple project and it was built, just as he will breathe on our new shule building. He's going to breathe on that child that's not doing right...breathe onto your health that's failing...on to your finances. When you begin to get discouraged and wonder if it's ever going to happen, just remind yourself, “That as long as I don't give up, Gd will breathe His light into me.”

It's not that everything you ask for will happen. It's that Gd will do what's best for you and all the dreams He put in your heart, if you keep your faith, will eventually happen. This is the Jewish “Secret.” Don't just see your life for the way it is now. Get that cornerstone out! See your dreams completed. See them fulfilled. *Cheyn, cheyn la*, Gd let it be!”

Since Rosh Hashanah is the time to envision the completion of our dreams, let's do that now. I want everyone here to close their eyes. Take a couple of deep breathes, and with each breath feel more and more relaxed. [Pause] Let's see into the future to next Rosh Hashanah. Imagine sitting in our new shule with all your loved ones bathed in Gd's light, singing praises of thanksgiving to Gd for bringing us into our new shule. See what it looks like and how wonderful it feels to be there...

Now think about all your hopes and dreams for this New Year. See your dreams completed in front of you. What does it look like? How does it

feel?...Imagine yourself thanking Gd next year in our new shule for fulfilling your dreams this year...[Pause] Open your eyes.

We close our prayers on Rosh Hashanah morning with the prayer, *Hayom*. *Hayom* means “today.” We sing [sing it]:

Hayom t'amtzeynu, “Today Gd, strengthen us.

Hayom t'varcheynu, “Today Gd, bless us.”

Hayom tishma shavateynu, “Today Gd, hear our cries.” *Hayom t'kabeyl b'rachamim uvratzon et t'filateynu*, “Today Gd, accept our prayers with compassion and will them to be!”

So let's sing this prayer at the close of the service today with gusto, and—as we leave the shule—let's go out with renewed determination and expectancy. Let's keep in our hearts the words of Psalm 27 from our prayers this season: *Kavey el Hashem, chazak v'ameytz libecha, v'kavey el Hashem*, “Hope in Gd; strengthen yourself and He will give you courage to go on; hope in Hashem!” Amen!