

My friends, I am a great believer in New Year's resolutions. I'm not talking about the intense self-inspection that we do leading up to Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. I have a lighter approach to resolutions for the secular new year. I am going to share some thoughts about New Year's resolutions with you tonight, but I want to understand why I am doing so. I believe happy people make the world better, and therefore I believe we have a moral obligation to be as happy as we are able to be. New Year's resolutions, in my opinion, are part of the recipe for happiness. I will give you one reason now: when we make New Year's resolutions, we are telling ourselves we are the masters of our own destinies. And what if we make resolutions and fail to keep them? Then it is time to reframe the famous words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." It's better to know we are making the effort than to be ruled by the fear of failure.

I'll share one of my own from last year at this point. First, I will tell you I try to make my resolutions achievable, so I don't make them too big. If I resolved to lose fifty pounds during the next year, I would go into it without much confidence that I would succeed. But I do want to lose weight, and every expert I read says that diet soda is full of things that make weight loss more difficult. So I resolved to eliminate diet soda from my diet, and replace it with seltzer, which I prefer anyway and feels more Jewish than Diet Coke. All of my great-aunts in Philadelphia had a seltzer man deliver bottles of seltzer to their houses when I was little. I've never heard of anyone who has a Diet Coke delivery man.

Did I succeed? It depends on how you define success. I have indeed consumed some diet soda over the past year. However, I would estimate that I drank 90% less diet soda in 2016 than I did in 2015. So my answer is that the resolution was successful. I greatly reduced my consumption of an unhealthy product, and do you know what? It makes me happy that I did so.

Another of my ideas about New Year's resolutions is to make several of them. Why? Because it increases your chances of keeping at least some of them. If you put all your revolutionary eggs (a word my computer insists does not exist, but I just used it so it exists now) in one basket, it becomes an all or nothing proposition. So I do make multiple resolutions, and do better at some than at others, but I'm glad I made them all.

Another resolution I made last year illustrates something else I believe: it is better to share your resolutions with others than to keep them to yourself. If you have made a commitment known, it is harder to break it. So using the wonderful website Goodreads dot com, I set a goal of reading eighteen books in a year.

That was a very ambitious goal. I spend a good deal of time studying Torah, both in the narrow sense of the Torah itself, and in the broader rabbinic sense of *Talmud Torah*, the study of Jewish texts beyond the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, so I was talking about reading eighteen books over and above the studying I do. Did I succeed?

If that means did I read eighteen new books, no, I did not. But knowing that others could track my progress on Goodreads resulted in something positive: I choose to read more than I choose to watch television than I did in the previous year. I'm not a snob; I have favorite television shows that I watch regularly. But this past year, I almost never channel surfed. I read instead, and I read more than I would have if I had not set a goal, and I read more than I would have if only I knew that goal. And do you know what? Because of that goal, I read some fabulous books, both Jewish and secular, and reading is something that I have always loved to do. If so, why did I channel surf more two years ago? Just because it is so easy to do. You just point the remote control at the cable box and you are presented with more choices of programs than anyone could watch. Do you know what I ended up watching most of the time I channel surfed? Reruns of shows I had already seen.

Did I enjoy it? Yes. But would I say I was happy I spend an hour channel surfing? No, but I will certainly tell you I am happy I read Rabbi Harold Kushner's latest book, and I am happy I read *The Passionate Photographer* by Steve Simon, to give you a Jewish and a secular example. And I'll ask again: do you know what happened? Because of *The Passionate Photographer*, I started shooting more pictures. As much as I love photography, it took that book to inspire me to work at growing as a photographer, and that meant shooting more pictures, and shooting more pictures made me very happy.

One final example: a resolution to take my guitar out and play for ten minutes every day. Did I do it every day? No. Were there times I did it not because I felt like it, but because of my resolution? Yes, and I can tell you that when you don't feel like keeping a commitment you made to yourself but you force yourself to follow through, it always feels great afterwards. Not a single time did I push myself to put in the ten minutes and regretted it afterwards. I was always happy I had kept my commitment, at least for that day, and I am a better player now than I was a year ago, and that also makes me happy.

And so, my friends, I am a proponent of making New Year's resolutions, making several of them, and sharing them with others. I am even glad I made the ones at which I believe I failed, and did not even partially succeed. I'll just try again this year. And I know that one year from now, I will be happy that I did. I wish you all a happy and healthy 2017, and a Shabbat Shalom.