Don’t Be Like Mike!

Be like Mike! How many of you remember the Gatorade commercials in the 1990s featuring Michael Jordan with the catch phrase “Be like Mike.” The jingle of the advertisement sang: Sometimes I dream, that he was me. You’ve got to say that’s how I dream to be. A dream I move, a dream I grew, like Mike, if I could be like Mike, if I could be like Mike………Drink Gatorade!” In the 6th grade, I sported white patent leather Air Jordan sneakers. I wanted to be like Mike! I only wish someone had told me that this 4’11 Jewish white boy would never grow any taller than 5’8; that I was never going to jam from the free throw line, let alone dunk the ball; that I would never play in the NBA; that I would never have my own Hanes commercials sporting tagless tees long after I retired. I wish Gatorade had told me: Be like you! Don’t try to be like Mike! Dream to be more like yourself, to move and grow more like you. If I could remake that commercial I would do it without Michael Jordan, and simply tell Gatorade drinkers to be like yourself, look inside yourself, and find that beverage that appeals to you. Of course, my commercial would not sell so much Gatorade, but it would send the right message. Find yourself.

Rosh HaShana is the time we think about being better human beings, and better Jews for the upcoming year. I DO NOT want us to think that we should be like Michael Jordan, or even Moses for that matter. My advice to you is to strive to become more like the best version of yourself.

Our tradition has a label for this sense of perfect self, it is called neshama, or soul. If you are a Hebrew speaker, you might use the word neshama as a term of endearment for your significant other. If your Bubbe spoke Yiddish, she may have told you as a child that you have such a guteneshama, a good soul, or a yiddisher neshama, a sweet soul. Or perhaps you
remember this word from Psalm 150: *Kol Ha Neshama Tehalel Ya*; Let every soul praise the name of God.

*Neshama*, the soul, according to our tradition, speaks to a concept beyond some ghostly part of us. *Neshama* is that part of our selves that urges us to use our potential to become the fullest human being. *Neshama* is that part of us that elevates our intellect, ennobles our sense of ethics and morality, and heightens our awareness of God in the world. That guiding force, the *neshama*, pushes us to be the people who we are meant to be. There is no one size fits all model for the *neshama* because everyone’s soul is unique. The Talmudic rabbis describe God as a minter of human souls. While a human minter makes coins from a single mold all with the same face, God mints each person so that no two souls are alike.¹

The high holidays focus us on getting in touch with our *neshama*, and doing some soul searching to figure out which ways we diverge from our *neshama*. We start using the Hebrew word “*Teshuvah*” at this time of year.” Our prayer book, for example, we call Sha’are Teshuvah, formally translated by the phrase, the Gates of Repentance. Repentance, however, is a word tinged with the formality of confession, apology for our sins, and divine judgment. This High Holidays, I want us to rethink this word repentance, and begin to understand *teshuvah* a little bit differently. Let’s stop talking about repenting and repentance.

*Teshuvah* literally means return. It is a return to the basics; a return to our best selves; a return to our spiritual blueprint. Or perhaps more simply, we return to our *neshama*, our soul. The act involves turning inward to understand who we are at our best; in other words, who we could be. No model for perfection exists: we are not Moses, nor are we like Mike, we are unlike each person around us, and this is perhaps what makes returning to our *neshama* so difficult.

Our culture gets so caught up in the idea of role models. The conventional wisdom is that EVERYONE needs a role model, someone to look up to, to be like. I want to challenge the notion that we need role models to emulate. There should be no set model of what we should become. Don’t say that this New Year, we are going to be more like someone else: more like the

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¹ B. Sanhedrin 73a.
president, more like an admired philanthropist, or like a cool athlete. We possess our own unique *neshamas*, our own inner role model.

Hassidic lore teaches of a sage by the name of Rabbi Zusya who embodies this thinking. Zusya was loved by all who knew him for his piety and for his humility. As he grew old and feeble and realized that death was near, he began to tremble in fear. His students said to him, “Rabbi, you have lived a great life. Why do you tremble at the prospect of dying? He responded: I do not fear that when I stand before God, should God say to me, Zusya, why weren’t you another Moses? I will have an answer for God. I will say: Master of the universe, You did not grant me the great soul of Moses. What I truly fear is if God will say to me: Zusya, why were you not Zusya. Why were you not more like the soul I implanted within you! Zusiya’s role model should have been Zusya.

In our time, we hear the echoes of Zusya from many great men and women. Steve Jobs expressed Zusya’s concern when in front of the Stamford graduating class of 2005 he offered that: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice." And more recently, Diana Nyad, the 64-year-old woman who defied the limits of human endurance and swam in open water from Cuba to Keywest, 110 miles, asserted that the spirit that carried her on this incredible journey was a projection of her best self. Before a press conference last Friday, as she was about to begin her successful journey, she uttered the simple message: “be your best self.” In essence, become your soul, become your neshama!

This week students are heading back to school. And I’m sure that teachers will inevitably ask their students with older siblings who had previously studied with them, the following question: “I bet you’re a good student just like your big brother or sister?....”. Growing up with two older brothers, I endured this uncomfortable question from grade to grade. “Are you like your brother?” Of course, this pushed me toward an all too common identity problem among children with older siblings. I wanted to be like my older brothers. They played baseball, I played baseball; they played basketball, so did I; they joined the wrestling team in high school…. I think you know where this is going. I wish someone would have just said; be who you really
are. You are not your brothers! This might seem obvious, but it took me a long time to figure that out. And I’m sure that I am not the only one who has grappled with this dilemma.

In seeing Rosh HaShana as the Jewish New Year, we should consider making Teshuvah as the Jewish New Year’s resolution. Most typical New Year’s resolutions do not involve soul searching, but rather swearing off habits and pounds. Typical New Year’s Resolutions go something like this. In the upcoming year, I’m going to:

- Lose weight
- Get organized
- Save more
- Go to the Gym more often

Most New Year’s Resolutions inevitably fail. One study shows that 45% of Americans make New Year’s Resolutions, and only 8% end up achieving their goals. In other words, 92% of New Year’s resolutions our fail! 92%!!! Tonight I want to challenge us to set some goals for making Teshuvah. But this making Teshuvah, our return to alignment with our neshamas, our souls, I want us to do a little bit better than 8%, and I think that we can find ways to make teshuvah stick.²

New Year’s resolutions tend to fail not because we don’t really want to lose weight, to save more, to spend less, and get organized. I believe that many New Year’s resolutions fail because people set out to turn themselves into someone that they are not. In making Teshuvah, our goal should be to turn us into ourselves. It’s so easy to compare ourselves to other people that we may know and admire. But remember Zusya’s, we need to focus in on becoming more on becoming more like ourselves, at becoming more like our soul. If you set out to “be like Mike,” I think you will be one of the 92 percent of people who made failed New Year’s resolutions.

² University of Scranton. Journal of Clinical Psychology
In suggesting that you towards returning to your neshama, I want us to do an exercise that will aid us in bringing out our inner selves, our neshama. If you’re comfortable doing so, perhaps close your eyes now.

Picture yourself as you are now, (what would do you see in the mirror. What parts of your self do you want to share with the world? And which parts are you less proud of? Visualize what your neshama might look like. What is your soul calling out to you? What potential inside you remains untapped? What about you have you yet to share with the world? Who could you become with the blessings that God bestowed upon you? Picture the people who bring out your neshama, your best self? Now think of one sentence that embodies who you are as the best version of yourself; one line to describe your neshama. Take a breath… and open your eyes!

I hope you have begun to unmask your neshama, to discover what your soul might look like. But soul searching requires more than a few minutes. This might be something that you continually think about throughout the High Holy Days. This search for your soul will not be easy. In responding to the concerns of the Israelites about this process of Teshuvah, Moses offers some sound advice that I want to reiterate:

לָּנוּ וְיִקָּחֶהָ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה לָּנוּ - יַעֲלֶה מי, לֵאמֹר: הִוא, בַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא. הִוא רְחֹקָה וְלֹא, מִמְּךָ הִוא נִפְלֵאת - לֹא. לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ, וּבִלְבָבְךָ בְּפִיךָ: מְאֹד, הַדָּבָר אֵלֶיךָ קָרוֹב – כִּי ….

It is neither beyond your ability or too far off an idea for you. Don’t say that this thing is way off in heaven, and who is going to ascend all the way up to heaven to
get it for me. Rather this thing (*teshuvah*) is in your mouth, and it’s in your heart. 
[It’s so close that you can taste it!]

The process of becoming more attuned to our soul, and transforming ourselves, is within our grasp. And the gates of *teshuvah*, sha’are *teshuvah*, (that name of our prayer book) are ALWAYS open for us throughout the year.

No matter how far we stray, the purity of our souls is within us, waiting to be rediscovered. Alienation from our *neshama*, our soul may leave us feeling empty, morally deficient, or spiritually numb, but we always have the opportunity to reconnect with our true selves; our soul can never be corrupted by our actions. This is an INCREDIBLE concept. We can make *teshuvah* no matter how far we have strayed.

In morning services, we thank God for this remarkable blessing with the prayer *Elohai Neshama* and say:

אֵלֹהִי נְשָׁמָה וְאַתָּה בִּי נְפַחְתָּה אַתָּה יְצַרְתָּה אַתָּה בְרָאתָהּ אַתָּה היא טְהוֹרָה בִּי שֶׁנָּתַתָּ נְשָׁמָה אֱלֹהַי

The soul that you have given me is PURE! Your create it, You formed it, and you breathed it into me. And You continually guard it within me.

Our soul will always remain pure, and we will always have the ability to find our way towards *neshama*.

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3 The commentator Albo notes that “A look at Nitzavim will convince us that the context is dealing with the subject of *teshuvah*. The chapter begins by outlining the precept of repentance calling on us to "turn unto the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul." After this, the text emphasizes the value of *teshuvah* by indicating how easy it was to achieve: "For this commandment is not too hard for you ... it is not in heaven ... it is right here!" The text is certainly alluding to *teshuvah*. An indication of this can be seen in the words: "It's on the tip of your tongue, it's already in your heart." *Teshuvah* involves confession of the lips and remorse in the heart.”
The question for tonight is not, “what have I done?,” and it’s not “who am I?,” but rather it’s who am I supposed to be? What is the best version of me? This is essentially Zusiya’s point. Be the best Zusiya!

In searching out our souls, we not only find the path back to ourselves, but we can find a glimpse of God, “the Soul of all souls.” To make *teshuvah*, to turn to our true self, is to live a life in the image of God. In bringing in this Jewish New Year, our resolutions for 5774 should not be in the form of repenting for the sins of the past year. Instead, throughout these days of Awe, we should work on searching ourselves to discover our *neshama*. Don’t be like Mike, Don’t be like Moses; don’t be like your father and mother, and don’t be like Zysya! Reach inward, find who you could be at your best, and share that person with the world.