L'shanah Tovah/Happy New Year! What a blessing! What a gift to receive the gift of time. Regardless of the past, today is a new year. We are here today to celebrate.

When discussing this New Year, I often emphasize ending last year-the graduation aspect of Rosh Hashanah instead of the commencement part. Today I would like to focus on the commencement aspect of Rosh Hashanah: beginning; getting more time; time to build on the foundation of the past; the gift of time. For those of us who are receiving this gift of time, the question is really a simple one. What are we going to do with it?

Are we going to travel through next year walking in place, doing what we have always done, without thought or reason? Is this coming year a year of transition and change? Do we have goals to accomplish or the picture of the person we hope to become? Are there values that we want to implement into our lives or personality characteristics that need refining? Do we have a picture in our mind's eye of what we hope to be or what we hope to accomplish in this coming year?

There are infinite ways to gauge our goals, what our values are, and what we hope to become. One is looking at our cultural references. For the music we listen to, the movies/TV shoes we watch, the jokes we laugh at, the books we read, the venues that deliver our news-all give clues into our values and moral compass.

This last year, I have been thinking about our guilty pleasures/our fantasies. What do we imagine our life to be if everything was on the table? When our children were younger, it was what super power would I like to have-being invisible, and/or changing our body shapes were some of my favorite. I imagined myself the size of an insect able to carry items 5000 times my weight, swing my web 4 feet in any direction or turn into the proverbial fly on the wall.

These fantasies, on one level, really are ridiculous. On another hand, they give you too clear of a window into what I believe, expect, fear and/or hope to become. The same is true for our popular past times, for they are metrics that help us take the temperature of our country and sometimes our world. In the last couple of years, Rodney has introduced me to new TV series and different movies that have led me to think about our contemporary society in different ways. Let me ask you, how many people have watched a Marvel movie in the past year? Personally I have watched three: Avengers Endgame, Captain Marvel and Spiderman. Now how many people watched Gotham, the prequel to Batman? Guilty as charged.

On the one hand, these two different examples of popular culture are very similar. The world is in crisis. It requires super hero talents to save it. At the last moment before all is lost, the hero of the day swoops in, often in a physically dramatic manner, and saves the day.

Being alive can often feel scary, uncontrollable, and heading for a train wreck. Our political world is fraught with name-calling, arguments, and one- line barbs, paralyzed with partisan politics, unable to move forward. Compromise has become our contemporary bad word. And it is easier to complain about those people than to truly try to understand them. Marvel Studios and Gotham, to name a few, tiptoe into our everyday fears of hate, violence, economic ruin, health crisis, homelessness, and racism.

Often the problems of today - over population as portrayed in End game or the lack of a strong just authority figure as shown in Gotham, or the inability to know who or what to trust because of the technological ability to manipulate feelings, knowledge and points of views, as show in Spider-man, come to life in the movies. Going back one more year, Black Panther gave us a window into economic inequality and racial disparity, family dysfunction and misdirected anger.

No one in his or her right mind would consider any of these serious discussions of difficult contemporary plagues. But all of them are very real fears, very real concerns, and by transforming them into something bigger than life or at least bigger than my small piece of life, they become manageable or, at least, less terrifying.

Until recently, I would argue that as similar as they are, there is an important difference between the Marvel movies and Gotham. One, I think, reflects how we perceive those we strongly disagree with-those we demonize. Until Avengers Endgame, the Marvel movies were built on the idea that before the movie began, you knew who the good guy was. As soon as the haunting music was played you knew who the bad guy was. Before you turned the movie on, you knew good would triumph over bad. The only question was how would good do all the things we imagined we would do but never seem to accomplish, if only we had their super powers.

The last three Marvel movies have added a little nuance. It took two movies to destroy Thanos and discover that Thanos had snapped the infinity stones into atoms, scattering them in the universe, unable to be used in their current form again to harm all living creatures in the universe.   Some of the heroes died-i.e. the actors' contracts were not renewed. And in Spiderman we were left hanging as to whether or not the good guy could ever reclaim his good reputation again. A perfect set up for a sequel ---too bad contract negotiations fell through. We might never find out how Spiderman reclaims his good name.

And then there is Gotham or, if you prefer a more sophisticated example of popular culture, House of Cards. The really good guys and the really bad guys are known when the show begins. But soon after, good and bad become completely mixed up and confusing.

There are episodes in Gotham where the Commissioner forges an unlikely alliance with Penguin and at in a moment of weakness fathers a child with Barbara. In House of Cards, people have to constantly make choices to save their loved ones, keep their jobs and/or be killed based on a moment's weakness that would define their career instead of their humanity. Desperate political alliances are begrudgingly made between Frank Underwood and Jackie Sharp. In the end of both series, the viewer is left with the knowledge that no one is a role model, living a good life is impossible, and sometimes making a deal with the devil is the best deal on the table in order to survive.

One might ask, "Why is Rabbi Starr wasting what little time we have during this sacred day talking about pure entertainment?" Not even highbrow-classic literature-but truly base forms of guilty pleasure. Well, one conclusion is that I definitely need to create a new year's resolution not to watch so much TV! The second reason is that Marvel movies, Gotham, and House of Cards have become reflections of our public discourse. Do we believe there are really good guys and bad guys who determine our lives? Yes, sadly many of us do. Do some of us believe that there are very stupid people who make uneducated voting decisions as Hilary Clinton suggested? Unfortunately, many of us do. Are progressive Jews ignorant and/or disloyal as President Trump accused? Have we demonized those with whom we disagree so that no matter what they say, we hear the music playing as soon as they enter the room? Are there no ethical choices left in our lives? Is every decision a matter of life and death forcing us to break every value we believe in only to survive?

Now to be fair, our popular culture thrives on extremes, thankfully our lives, or mine anyway, does not swing from polar opposites of life, at least not most years. But the truth of the matter is our political and intellectual life does.

We only watch one or two TV stations for our news. I won't embarrass you any further to ask how many of us truly found something interesting or validating on either Fox or One American News. We stop discussing or even socializing with people who we know do not share our political view. Our political arena has become like a Marvel movie-before the political debate about immigration, climate change, racial disparity, and/or reparations began**,** we know who to cheer and who to boo. We know who we will defend and who we will condemn. We rarely listen; we rarely try to get to yes. We have, in effect, lived the Marvel Movies into our political Lives.

I am afraid to say my next sentence because it would be all too easy to lift out of context. Yet truth is never simple; it is often complex and frightening. Otherwise we would all be so much more truthful! I would rather live in the world of Gotham where each moment determines the good guy and the bad guy than in one like Marvel where all is predetermined before the movie begins. In Gotham, one is allowed to compromise for the greater good. In Gotham, one can see the other side as a desperate human attempt to live a good life just defining what is good differently. In Gotham our answers are not sound bites, but rather evolving thoughts allowed to be refined and perfected through the arguments of the other. Now I do not want to overreach - Gotham is not PBS. There is no hour-long discussion of any one policy in great detail. But it is a crash course on how complicated it is to both hold onto our values and live our lives. As

President Roosevelt wrote, "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is maimed by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who actually strive to do the deeds;…who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

I love Marvel movies for the same reason I loved math until first year of college calculus. It really was a world of right and wrong. Two plus two never added up to seven. But in the world of ethics, sometimes stealing food to feed one's children can seem filled with virtue.

This coming year two different subcommittees, of our Tikkun Olam committee/ our Social Action committee, will be bringing two very difficult discussions to our community: immigration and being transgender and/or gender nonconforming. We will be exploring each topic from a secular, political, psychological, and Jewish point of view. The goal will be to learn how to stay open to another person's point of view even if we "know" they are wrong, with the firm belief that we are only stronger in our diversity and to acknowledge that complicated ideas require questions, discussion, refinement, and time to think rather than holding fast to party lines and/or sound bites that slice and dice us, bringing very little clarity of thought or policy.   Truly one of the aspects of Jewish learning that I have benefitted from as a person, as a Jew and as a rabbi over the years, is the firm belief that we are to analyze a topic from all sides of the argument to the point where we are to present the opinion we do not believe in a believable manner before trying to prove it wrong; to the point where the rabbis not only preserved the minority point of view to illustrate why it is wrong, but also to lift it up as legitimate, just wrong for today;

to the point where the majority of arguments in the Talmud do not have the "right answer," but rather volumes of complicated discussions. For the discussion was meant to refine our thinking, give us pause to see the complexities and encourages us to understand, not condemn, those we disagree with.

I was taught that every sermon should have a take away. What is the one I consciously am offering you? That we make our lives more complicated, more confusing; that we entertain the idea that the other is also made in Gd's image with something valuable to teach us as Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (Polish rabbi in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century) wrote, "Everything there is in reality, whether good or bad, and even the most evil and harmful in the world, has a right/merit of existing, and it's forbidden to destroy and eradicate it from the world completely. Rather, what is laid upon us is only to mend it, and bring it to the side of goodness." I suggest that we enter into a study of Jewish text-through the amazing adult Ed offerings, and/or a private tutorial with me. As it is written in Kiddushin 40b, "Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nithza's house, in Lod, when this question was posed to them: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: Study is greater. All the rest agreed with Akiva that study is greater than action because it leads to action." I suggest that we learn from Jewish methodology of how to discuss as opposed to our contemporary world of how to pass exams and win debate points. As it is written in Pirkei Avot 4:1 "Who is wise? S/He who learns from every person." I suggest that we entertain for a moment that if the means really do justify the end, our means has become filled with fear, pre-judgements and hate. Is that really the end we want to live into this coming year?

Now do not get me wrong, my life turning into a Gotham or House of cards show is just down right terrifying.

Just as terrifying as my life being filled with more 140 character sound bites used to oversimplify complicated ideas. Zingers make good TV, might even win political campaigns but are truly antithetical to Judaism. We are blessed with a rich, fine-tuned method of discovering different ways to understand the world, if we would only use it…..

I began this long tangent by saying what a blessing it is to get a New Year. Now the question is, what are we going to do with this gift of time? In a moment our Cantor Emeritus, Jan Morrison, is going to usher us into the Torah service which begins on pp. 464. The word Torah literally means instruction. The Torah is the first of many educational opportunities given to us as Jews. May we take advantage of them in the coming year. May this coming year be a year filled with learning, nuance, careful thought, and transformed opinions. May we learn to listen and communicate effectively. And may we never forget to learn more about others and by definition even more about ourselves. L'shanah Tovah/Happy New Year!