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Inspiration from Two Women

Shanah Tovah everyone. A good year to you and your loved ones.

A good year.
A good year...

What do we mean when we wish someone a good year? What are we hoping for? That they have decent health? Success in business? Deepened relationships with friends and loved ones? That they gain more knowledge? Embark on new adventures? All of the above?

How do we define a good year?

Perhaps it's less about us as individuals and more about others. Are fewer people starving? Do more people have jobs, homes and healthcare? Is there less violence and sickness in the world?

Sadly, when we read the news, we are bombarded with disappointment and gut-wrenching stories. Each year seems to be less "good" than the previous year.

Let me remind you of some of the headlines since last Rosh Hashanah.

On December 14, 2012, a troubled and sick 20 year-old brought a nation to tears with his unconscionable actions at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.
In January, Lance Armstrong admitted he cheated for at least a decade.

On April 15, 2013, two brothers wreaked havoc at the Boston marathon.

In July, the Westboro Baptist Church praised God for killing 19 heroic firefighters who battled the raging fires in Prescott, Arizona because they refused to follow the church.

Syrian President, Bashar Assad continues to terrorize his country with chemical weapons. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that since the beginning of the 29-month uprising, well over 110,000 people have been killed.

It is challenging to see the good in this world when we are faced with this reality.

Despite all the evil that we see around us, and there certainly seems to be a lot of it, thankfully, there is also righteousness, goodness and inspiration. In just the past 48 hours alone, two stories of amazing women have changed the way I see the current state of our world. Their stories of struggle and determination have inspired me and countless others. These courageous

women bring light into the world by being who they are. They help me say Shanah Tovah with conviction and hope. I'd like to share their stories with you this evening.

I am sure we have all heard about the recent long-distance swim that Diana Nyad completed. In nearly 53 hours, this 64 year-old women became the first person ever to swim from Cuba to Florida without a protective cage. That's 103 miles in shark and jellyfish infested waters. I cannot imagine the toll this test of endurance has on one's body and psyche. Diana must be a bionic super-hero.

Diana happens to be a competitive long-distance swimmer. She has made the headlines several times.

Over two days in 1979, Nyad swam from the Bahamas to Florida, setting a distance record for non-stop swimming without a wetsuit that still stands today.

She also broke the 45-year-old record for circling Manhattan Island in just less than 8 hours in 1975.

With these and many other successes, however, came many setbacks. This most recent swim from Cuba was her fifth attempt. Nyad's first effort came in 1978 when she was 29 years old. The last three all came after her 60th birthday. In each of these first four tries, Diana had to call it quits due to jellyfish stings, health issues and severe weather.

This historic swim was by no means a cake walk. Nyad said that for nearly 49 hours winds blew her all around. She also ingested salt water which got her sick. She got cut up and sun-burnt from the elements. She was fatigued. Her face and lips got swollen too. Despite all of this, Diana focused on her long-held goal and repeated her personal mantra throughout the quest: "Find a way."

When she emerged from the waters off the coast of Florida, she said to reporters, "I got three messages. One is we should never, ever give up. Two is you never are too old to chase your dreams. Three is it looks like a solitary sport, but it's a team."

A story like this puts things in perspective, doesn't it? Who among us has given up trying when faced with obstacles and hurdles? Who among us has quit a task because the path seemed too treacherous? Who among us has been afraid to try something new? Who among us has regrets for not pushing forward?

Diana Nyad is a portrait of dedication and perseverance. She never gave up on her dream. She said, "You have a dream 35 years ago -- doesn't come to fruition, but you move on with life. But it's somewhere back there. Then you turn 60, and your mom just dies, and you're looking for something. And the dream comes waking out of your imagination."

It's not only about perseverance. Nyad trusted herself and believed in herself. She harnessed this strength at an age when many people desire to enter the twilight of their lives. Diana willed herself to an unbelievable personal victory.

Diana Nyad brings light into this dark world. She teaches us to never give up no matter the obstacles we face.

The other woman who has made the news recently is Anat Hoffman. She was just named "Person of the Year" by Ha'aretz, one of Israel's leading newspapers. Hoffman is the director of the Israel Religious Action Center (www.irac.org), the legal and advocacy arm of the Reform movement in Israel, and founder of Women of the Wall (www.womenofthewall.org.il). This group gathers to pray at the Western Wall each Rosh Hodesh. They have been doing so for 25 years. Hoffman is both a leader of social justice and a champion of religious pluralism in Israel.

In October I wrote about one of her arrests at a Rosh Chodesh celebration at the Western Wall. She was joined by nearly 200 members of Hadassah who were in Israel commemorating the organization's 100 year anniversary.

Getting arrested at the *Kotel* is nothing new to Hoffman. As a leader and participant of Women of the Wall, she's had her share of altercations with Israeli police and angry *davening* men on the other side of the plaza's 7-foot partition. You see, according to The Western Wall Foundation, an ultra-Orthodox group that maintains the holy site, women are not allowed to wear *tallitot*, *kippot*, or *tefillin* at the wall, nor are they allowed to read Torah there either. These are all things that men can do. Women are free to pray at the wall, just not like men.

When Hoffman leads this group in prayer each Rosh Chodesh, the women must wear *tallitot* like scarves for fear of getting things thrown at them or even spit on. Women from almost all denominations join Hoffman at this monthly event. This might be the longest-running cross-denominational Jewish worship group. It is inspiring to see Reform, Conservative, modern Orthodox, secular, Renewal, and Reconstructionist Jews praying side by side.

In 2003, Israel's Supreme Court upheld a government ban on women wearing *tefillin* or *tallitot* or reading from a Torah scroll at the Wall. And in 2005, Women of the Wall were banished from the women's section to a nearby archeological site, because the site of women wrapped in *tallitot* and the sound of their voices offended Haredi men and women. Failure to abide by these laws can bring a 6 month jail sentence and a near \$3000 fine. Interestingly, Hoffman says in "23 years of praying this way every month, not one ultra-Orthodox attacker has been charged for spitting, cursing or assaulting the Women of the Wall."ⁱ

What happened to Hoffman this one day in October was especially noteworthy. While she was reciting the Shema, our universal declaration of faith, police warned her to stop and then when she continued, they handcuffed her. Hoffman writes, "I was handcuffed, strip searched, laid on the bare floor. I was not allowed to call my lawyer."ⁱⁱ She was thrown into a cell with no bed and had to keep herself covered with her tattered tallit.

Hoffman is not a newcomer to controversy. Previously she served for 14 years as a member of Jerusalem's City Council, making a name for herself as a critic of the ultra-Orthodox religious monopoly and defender of religious pluralism in Israel's capital. In this capacity, she also became an outspoken critic of the widespread gender discrimination throughout the city. "She launched the country's first-ever investigation into salary discrepancies between male and female municipal workers, and discovered that women, on average, earned 46 percent less than their male colleagues. Her investigation was later replicated in cities across the country."ⁱⁱⁱ

As head of Women of the Wall, Hoffman's efforts over the past year to secure equal praying rights for women at the *Kotel*, were at the focal point of media attention and public debate in both the Diaspora and Israel. She has certainly served as a role-model to many of my colleagues.

Hoffman's unwavering belief that every Jewish person, regardless of denomination or gender, has the right to worship at Judaism's most cherished site and her fight for justice to end the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on religious practice in Israel, are inspirational to many who share her views...and even to some who do not.

Despite being arrested, spit on, humiliated, having chairs and garbage thrown her way (all at the holiest site in Judaism), Anat Hoffman has not backed down nor has she been disillusioned to the point of leaving Judaism altogether. Just like Diana Nyad, Anat Hoffman does not back down. She continues to fight for justice. She continues to chase her dream.

In an interview with CNN's chief medical correspondent, Sanjay Gupta, Diana Nyad said, "I think that a lot of people in our country have gotten depressed, pinned in, pinned down with living lives they don't want." She continued: "You tell me what your dreams are. What are you chasing? It's not impossible. Name it."

This is a New Year for us. What dreams are we going to chase? What far-off goals will we begin to work towards? Will we trust ourselves and push our limits? Will we challenge those who stand in our way? Will we fight for our beliefs, for justice, for equality?

May the light that these inspiring women bring into our world shine on us and give us the strength and courage to be the individuals we desire to be. May this year be one filled with blessings and hope. May it be an exceedingly good and sweet year, a shanah tovah u'metukah.

ⁱ Hoffman, Anat. "Why I Was Arrested for Praying at the Western Wall." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 21 Oct. 2012. Web

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Berman, Daphna. "*Anat Hoffman Dares to Take On Israel's Orthodox Establishment. Can She Win?*" Moment Magazine RSS. Moment, 28 Feb. 2013. Web