

“You’re Already Perfect”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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Tamid: The Downtown Synagogue

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Teenagers, you have a special place in my heart. For most of the teenagers in this room, we celebrated your bar or bat mitzvahs together and I’ve known you for a lot of years. That was a big day in your life, and in the life of your family. Guess what, that was a big day for me too. I never forget bar and bat mitzvahs, I cherish those memories, I was proud of you on that day, and I’m proud to know you. You’re all special to me.

And so, in your honor, today starts the Year Of The Teen at Tamid and this sermon is for you, for anyone who knows a teenager, and for anyone who ever once was a teen ager.

Teens, we’ve got some real plans for you. It’s a given that we’ve got all our teen classes going, but we’re opening a teen lounge at Tamid. We have a new space just for you. It’s raw now, but we’re doing to design a very cool hangout, just for you. Couches, a stocked mini-fridge, the whole matzoh ball. Help us make a plan for this space, so you can have your own place, where even your parents can’t go.

You know, your parents. They are trying. They’re doing their best. Of course, let’s face it, they’re a little dorky, they talk too much, their music is weird, when they are teaching you a lesson “complaining” they don’t know when to stop, they think they are way cooler than they really are, and they have no idea what it’s like to be you.

I get it, I have a teenager at home and while you know that I am the coolest, a trendsetter, have great taste in music, a great listener, my kids think I am a total loser.

I actually catch myself saying the things your parents say like, “I’m sorry, am I your personal maid. Do you not see that your room is disgusting?”

Or, we are having dinner in like 5 minutes, do you really need to be eating that right now? It’s so unhealthy.

And the worst is that thing in your hands, all the time, “put that away. Turn that off. Didn’t I tell you to put that thing down. Give me that.”

It’s so boring for you to have us as your parents. But, they do hold the strings to the purse, so for now, you’re stuck. And it could be worse, I could be your dad. For the last two days, Emmett has been asking me in person, on the phone and texting me the question, “do I have to go to Rosh Hashanah services. Yes, you do. Next question. How long do I have to stay? I’m thinking, do you even know how good you have it. The music is awesome, the service is rather short, the rabbi doesn’t talk that much, and then you get to eat a bunch of free food. What is the problem?

Let’s focus on the real problems of teenagers today.

The real problem is the insane amount of pressure you feel to succeed and to thrive with all that crazy competition around you. And to figure out a way to get it all done, be a fantastic student, be the perfect friend, be cool, be smart, be independent, dress well, and finally, know exactly what you are doing every minute, make no mistakes, and always have a plan with a place to go.

Though I’m not a teenager anymore, I once was young and I remember it pretty well. There is one piece of advice that I have for you, which I learned in my own way, a few years after I graduated from college. I wasn’t a teen any longer, but I think the story captures what I want you to know.

People often ask me, “why did you want to become a rabbi?” Most people imagine that my family is religious or that one of my parents was a rabbi. Neither is true but I always enjoyed being in Jewish settings and teaching, counseling, and youth leadership always came natural to me. I did not go to Camp Swig in the summer of 1994 thinking that I wanted to become a rabbi, but I met a handful of young people my age who were on that pathway and we all became close friends.

To this day, I’m still close with that group, many who became influential Jewish leaders. When camp ended, I drove home from Northern to Southern California along the breathtaking Pacific Coast Highway. It was a wonderful ride and I remember that a spark went off in me. I had the plan!

I had just spent 4 years in college and while most of my friends were off to jobs and my parents certainly wanted me to be on the right path to get a job, I decided that I needed some time, and so I was going to take some time to travel around the West Coast.

When I got home that evening, My parents and I sat down for dinner. My mother said, “So, how was the summer? Did you have fun? Did you hear about Carolyn? She got a job offer at Deloitte. You should call her.”

“Actually mom and dad, I have a plan.” She says to my father, “He’s got a plan?” “I’m going to take the old Volvo and go on a road trip around the West Coast.” Blank stares. “Excuse me? That’s not a plan. That is avoiding a plan.” If another word was said at dinner that night, I don’t recall.

But I took off. My plan was to travel for as long as my summer camp earnings would take me. That lasted about three years. I’d lock up a job at summer camp, make a few bucks, and once the Fall came, I would resume my adventures. I travelled all over. Europe. Israel. Scandinavia, The Middle East. Nepal. Thailand. The States.

On one trip back home, I went to visit my childhood rabbi. Rabbi Miller was a stern fellow but a very learned and wise man. He asked about my life. I told him about my travels and my growing desire to become a rabbi. I was his first student to follow in his footsteps and I knew that made him proud. However, I was still getting pressure from my parents to follow a more traditional path and they had talked me into taking an LSAT prep course for law school which I was doing in the evenings. They said, “no matter what you do with your career, it cannot hurt to have a law degree.” At age 25, it seemed like the responsible thing to do.

Rabbi Miller listened well and then called me by my Hebrew name as he did when he had something grand to say. “Dov, let me tell you a story. This is the tale of Hayyim of Volozhin. He was not a very good student during his youth. One day he told his parents that he was done with studying and wanted to attend a trade school. They agreed, but later that night, young Hayyim had a dream. In this dream, an angel showed him a large pile of important books. He asked the angel, “whose books are those?” “Yours,” said the angel, “if you will have the courage to write them.”

Then Rabbi Miller clasped his hands on his big oak desk, looked at me without blinking, and smiled. I smiled too. Then he stood up and said, “Dov, be wise, be well, and have courage.”

Two weeks later I was sitting in a large hall at some Junior College taking the LSAT exam. I finished the first section and turned the booklet over where it read, “If you do not wish for this exam to count towards your permanent record, sign the bottom of the booklet, give it to the proctor, and leave the room quietly.” That’s exactly what I did.

The next morning at 9 AM, I drove the old Volvo to the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and with no appointment, dropped in on the Director of Admissions of the rabbinical school.

When I told my parents what happened at the LSAT and that I decided to apply to rabbinical school and not to law school, my father said the most supportive and caring thing any child could wish. “Darren, being a rabbi is nothing that I would ever want for myself. But knowing you and your interests, I think it is a wonderful choice.”

And then they hugged me. I could tell they were both a little concerned, but quite relieved when my mother said, “well, at least you have a plan.”

So let’s imagine that you are Hayim of Volzhin, the young man who had a dream. He told his parents that he was done with studying and wanted to attend a trade school. They agreed, but later that night, young Hayyim had a dream. In this dream, an angel showed him a large pile of important books. He asked the angel, “whose books are those?” “yours,” said the angel, “if you will have the courage to write them.”

And that is the wisdom that I wanted to share with you this morning. To have the courage to be exactly who you are because you are perfect. There’s nothing wrong with you. There’s nothing bad about your dreams. And there is nothing to be ashamed of ever.

You should just being exactly who you are and forget anyone who thinks you should act, look, behave, differently than you do. The same goes for your parents. They also know you are perfect but sometimes forget it. When they do, you have my permission the next time they are kvetching about you, you can say, “Rabbi Darren said I’m perfect.”

Courage is a very important character strength that I hope you will nourish in the year ahead. Courage is about having the willpower to achieve goals no matter what comes. Courage is about being brave, honest, and resilient. It takes courage to be yourself, but I know you will be.

When I think back on the moment that I closed the LSAT booklet and said, “no, law school is not for me right now. Maybe some other time. Now, I’m interested in taking the rabbinic path. That took courage. But I’m so glad I did because it led me here, to be with you and to know you and to watch you grow into the perfect people that you are.

In a little while later this morning, we are going to hear the blast of the shofar. The sages of our tradition thought the sound of the shofar was like the voice of God.

The shofar blast is like a personal siren that calls out to you and says, “Hey, are you living your best self? Are you happy with your life? How can you activate your courage to make things better at school, with your friends, at home?

Or maybe when that shofar blasts, you’ll hear a different message. And then, as your year unfolds, when you need a little dose of bravery, a little shot of courage, think back to the sound of the shofar, it will be God’s voice coming to you and saying, “be brave perfect one, you can do it.”