



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018
Not Throwing Away My Shot

*I am not throwing away my shot
I am not throwing away my shot
Hey yo, I'm just like my country
I'm young, scrappy and hungry
And I'm not throwing away my shot¹*

This rousing song comes near the beginning of the smash Broadway hit “Hamilton.” If you didn’t get a chance to see “Hamilton” on Broadway, you may have been among the many fortunate people who saw the show at the Kennedy Center this past summer. I was lucky enough to be among them!

If you’ve seen “Hamilton”—and if you haven’t—you know that the musical tells the story of Alexander Hamilton: hero of the Revolutionary War and a founding father of the United States. Hamilton was a scrappy, intelligent, ambitious immigrant from the Caribbean who established the US banking system, the US Coast Guard, and who authored the majority of the “Federalist Papers.”

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of “Hamilton,” writes that, like the rappers who inspired the songs in the show, Alexander Hamilton “lived hard, wrote fast, and hustled his [rear end] off.”² When he was 14, Hamilton wrote to a friend: “For to confess my weakness, Ned, my Ambition is prevalent.”³

What was the source of Hamilton’s ambitious drive? Lin-Manuel Miranda says that the song “My Shot”—the opening lines of which we just heard— is the most autobiographical thing he has written. “It’s what I feel I have most in common with Hamilton: The ticking clock of mortality is loud in both our ears, and it sets us to work....”⁴

Later on in the song “My Shot,” the character of Hamilton sings that “I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory.”⁵ Hamilton was acutely aware of mortality: he was orphaned at a young age, and had to fend for himself. He never thought he would live past the age of 20.

Hamilton’s determination to live life to the fullest, to not throw away his shot, is one of the central messages of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah, which marks the birthday of the world, prods us to ask ourselves what we are doing with the most important birth-day gift we will ever receive: the gift of our own lives. **There is a catch that comes with this gift, however: it has an expiration date.**

¹ “Hamilton: the Revolution,” 2016 by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Melcher Media, p. 26.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc7NqP_YGlg 1:14-1:35

² Ibid, p. 21

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 28

⁵ Ibid.

Rosh Hashanah comes to remind us, every year, that our time on earth is limited. Rosh Hashanah is that voice in the back of our head that asks us—if we let ourselves pay attention to it—how we’re going to use our time on earth. “Tell me,” asks the poet Mary Oliver, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”⁶

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that our power to act in the world is limited—not only by our reluctance to act— but often by circumstances that are beyond our control.

“Our power in this world is considerable, but also very circumscribed,” writes Rabbi Alan Lew. “It is only here and now, in this moment, in this place—in the present—that we can act. We cannot act in the past, we cannot act in the future.... So from a spiritual point of view we need to ask: What can I do here and now, in the present-tense reality of my own experience?”⁷

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that, if we have hopes and plans and dreams, we need to act on them. We should not wait.

Rosh Hashanah invites us to think and to dream and to grow as human beings—no matter how young or how old we are. Rosh Hashanah is the time for us to search our hearts for our dreams, dust them off, and decide what we will do with them. Rosh Hashanah is the time to say: “I am not throwing away my shot.”

OK, we argue, this is all fine, but we have things we must do in order to get through life. We have to-do lists, we have reminders on our phones, and we have calendars filled with appointments (and with reminders to make appointments). Sometimes we are so focused on what we **must** do that we don’t allow ourselves to be caught up in the colorful kaleidoscope of life that surrounds us.

In writing about the choreography of “Hamilton,” Sarah L. Kaufman notes that “where it stakes its own turf is in your nervous system. It **refuses** to let you think about your to-do list: It grabs your focus and holds you captive, afraid to miss what’s coming next. The way the dancers respond to the lyrics can make you feel like you’re living the story, participating in it.”⁸

What if we refuse to think—even for a few minutes— about our to-do lists? What if we decide that we don’t want to miss what’s coming next? How many shots have we thrown away because—while we were looking at or thinking about our to-do lists— we didn’t realize that our shots were right in front of us?

So, just for a few minutes, I invite you to put away your mental to-do list. I invite you to let your mind wander, to imagine what you’ll do in the coming year to make sure that you don’t throw away your shot.

⁶ <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>

⁷ “This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation,” by Alan Lew, p. 45.

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_danc/hamilton-choreographer-andy-blankenbuehler-delivers-a-revolution-that-rocks/2018/07/20/bf6ff34e-8a0b-11e8-8b20-60521f27434e_story.html?utm_term=.a96ff5523f5e

If you feel comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes. If you want to keep your eyes open, that's ok, too. If you would like to leave your eyes open, you might focus softly on a spot in front of you and just a bit above your eye level. By soft focus I mean looking without really trying to see anything at all.

I'd like to invite you to make yourselves comfortable in your seat. I'm going to offer some suggestions. You can feel free to participate as fully, as minimally, or as temporarily as you like.

I invite you to ask yourself if there is anything you can do to allow yourself to be just a bit more comfortable than you are now. Notice if any part of your body feels tense or uncomfortable. Make any changes you need to make in order to feel more comfortable. In addition, I invite you to **imagine** that you are even more comfortable than you are right now, that your body feels even more relaxed, even more fully balanced...as if for now there is a "timeout" from the cares and concerns and considerations of the outside world.

I invite you to notice that, as you inhale, your shoulders tend to rise, and that—as you exhale—your shoulders lower...You might try exaggerating that exhalation and descent of your shoulders as you exhale. Let your shoulders come all the way down...let your breathing be very natural...allow yourself to be more fully aware of what it feels like to take each breath. Notice that, with each breath you take, and with each exhalation, there are different sensations. You might be aware that, as it enters your body, the air you breathe in is cool in the back of your nose, in the back of your throat. You may notice that, as you breathe out, the air is warm.... of course, it has been warmed by the very process of your life. Just notice that there may be areas of your body that feel more relaxed than they did just a few minutes ago.

Let yourself imagine a very relaxing experience, using all of your senses. Perhaps you are walking through a meadow, or maybe you are lying on the warm sand at your favorite beach. You are hearing the sounds of your special place: the sounds of the ocean, birds calling to one another. Imagine that, in this special place, there is a warm, relaxing feeling slowly spreading all the way from your head to your toes.

In this relaxed place, your inner mind has the time and space to consider some important things.

I invite you to think about some questions, questions that might help you figure out how to recognize your shots in the New Year, and how not to throw them away:

What do you wish you had done more of during the last year? What can you see yourself doing this year so that you can make room for more of these things?

What are you "dying to do" that you've never done or tried? Imagine that, instead of "dying" to do these things, you tell yourself that you are "living" to do those things!

What chances did you have in the last year to spend time with the people who mean the most to you? How many of those opportunities did you take? What can you do in the coming year to organize your life so that you can spend time with the people who mean the most to you?

When was the last time you "dropped everything" to do something that sounded like fun?

What's the goal that's most important for you to try to reach this year? What can you do to help yourself get there?

As you consider these questions and any others that might arise, you might imagine yourself on a stage, in the production that is your life. Ask yourself how you might rearrange the scenery. How would you alter the costumes? How could you revise the dialogue? Are the songs for this production written in a key that suits you? If not, how can you change the key? Does the choreography express what you feel? If not, how can you modify the steps so that they reflect you?

As you consider these things, you are allowing breath to follow breath...just like the waves of the ocean. You are connecting with that part of yourself that is your own personal sanctuary, where you can explore these and other important questions. It's almost like finding a secret garden, a place that has been inside you all along...you just forgot where the gate is. This secret garden is a safe and quiet place, where you can imagine what you need to do in the New Year so that you don't throw away your shot. And you can return to this sanctuary, this secret garden, any time you wish.

When you are ready, let an inhalation open your eyes for you, or if your eyes have been in soft focus, gradually let your eyes refocus. Let your breath bring you back to this room, to this place. Notice how you have complete awareness of what is going on around you, but from a slightly different viewpoint. Almost as if you have reentered your body perfectly, but with just one fraction of a millimeter's difference from the way in which you inhabited your body before we began.

The director of the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, Tommy Kail, says that the song "My Shot" is what's called an "I want" song in musical theater. "These are the numbers," he says, "that appear early in a show, when the hero steps downstage and tells the audience about the fierce desire that will propel the plot...without a song like this, you wouldn't get very far in a musical."⁹

I would say that, without an "I want" song—a song that says what is most important to us—we won't get very far in the production that is our life.

As Alexander Hamilton says in the musical that bears his name:

"I'm a diamond in the rough, a shiny piece of coal
Tryin' to reach my goal....
The plan is to fan this spark into a flame."¹⁰

May this be the year that we fan the sparks of what is most important to us into a flame. May this be the year that we say: "I am not throwing away my shot."

*And I am not throwing away my shot
I am not throwing away my shot
Hey yo, I'm just like my country
I'm young, scrappy and hungry
And I'm not throwing away my shot*

⁹ "Hamilton: the Revolution," 2016 by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Melcher Media, p. 21.

¹⁰ "My Shot," from *Hamilton*.

We're gonna rise up (time to take a shot)
We're gonna rise up (time to take a shot)
We're gonna, rise up, rise up
It's time to take a shot
Rise up, rise up, it's time to take a shot
Rise up, it's time to take a shot
Rise up, take a shot, shot, shot
It's time to take a shot, time to take a shot
And I am not throwing away my shot
*Not throwing away my shot*¹¹

Ken Yehi Ratzon

¹¹ "Hamilton: the Revolution," 2016 by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Melcher Media, p. 30
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc7NgP_YGlg 4:56-5:33