

Kol Nidre 5778
Juliana S. Karol
Congregation Rodeph Sholom
New York, NY
Start-Up Faith

Unicorns are hotter than ever, but they are no longer spiral-horned horses with healing powers. A unicorn in today's parlance is a technology startup that attains a valuation of more than one billion dollars. Nine out of ten start-ups fail extinguishing millions of ideas before they reach us, the consumers. But we all know the unicorns. We likely have Uber or Lyft on our phones (maybe they brought us to temple today). We stream music on Spotify while perusing virtual bulletin boards on Pinterest. And our groceries are delivered by Instacart or curated by Blue Apron.

Our lives are streamlined by so many of these companies, making their rarity less apparent. But consider this: there are only 197 tech companies¹ in the world with the "unicorn" ranking and every year 305 million start-ups launch.² Unicorn success is so unlikely that one wonders, "Is there some trick, some deep insight shared by only the savviest entrepreneurs?"

The answer is yes. And the wisdom propelling these enterprising business people is rooted in *our* tradition.

Airbnb is a unicorn that dramatically changed the way we travel. Ten years ago, tourism meant leaving the comforts of home to be a stranger somewhere else. Hotels and motels reinforced our outsider-ness by cropping up in non-residential areas. The founders of Airbnb disrupted this model by creating a digital platform where people could rent space in their homes to travelers. What began in 2007 as low-cost alternative for dauntless tourists has now become an assumption for millions with vast economic range. \$12 per night rents a shared room in Jersey City while \$3000 per night pays for a 3-bedroom condo overlooking Lincoln Center. No longer relegated to commercial centers and airports, travelers are embedding themselves in communities worldwide. With each new booking, Airbnb inches closer to its mission: "belong anywhere."

So how did they do it? How did the three cofounders—Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk—convince so many of us to forgo our Hilton points in exchange for a stranger's bungalow? They co-opted a core idea in Jewish tradition: *na'aseh v'nishmah*—"we will do and we will listen."³ These words, spoken by the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, were the collective response to Moses' recitation of God's commandments. *Na'aseh v'nishmah* reflects a fundamental Jewish commitment to wrestle with Torah no matter how clearly we understand it.

Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia attended the Rhode Island School of Design. RISD propounds a pedagogy not all that different from Jewish theology: problems in the world can be solved by creative design. Jewish tradition holds that humanity partners with God in the ongoing construction of our world. One of the most oft-quoted parts of our legal tradition are the words of Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not [our] responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but neither are [we] free to

¹ Zack Friedman, "These 197 Tech Companies Are the World's Most Valuable Unicorns," *Forbes*, 30 May 2017 [accessed 25 Sept 2017]

² "How Many Start-Ups Are There? (Infographic)" *Get2Growth* [accessed 25 Sept 2017]

³ Exodus 24:7

desist from it.”⁴ RISD teaches its students to conceive of solutions and design them. The approach is rooted first in *na’aseh*—in doing. And RISD students like Chesky and Gebbia believed in their capacity to design a better world.

The Airbnb story begins with *na’aseh*. Needing to pay rent on their expensive apartment in San Francisco, the founders created a mechanism to supplement their income. With three air mattresses at \$80/night they built a website, promoted it, and found three travelers who appreciated their creativity and price point. In five days, they earned what they needed and Airbnb was born. Chesky, Gebbia and Blecharczyk did not spend years tweaking their idea. They launched first and reckoned later.

It might feel funny to think this way, but the inception of Airbnb is not all that different from the birth of Torah. Atop Mt. Sinai, God gave Torah to Moses. God didn’t offer a beta version or a 30-day free trial. The Israelites, like the three bold customers who booked the first Airbnb reservations, made their commitment—*na’aseh v’nishmah*—out of equal parts intrigue and desperation.

In Silicon Valley jargon, Judaism hit “product/market fit” at Mt. Sinai. God created a product—Torah—that the Israelites wanted. That they needed. Torah was officially viable once it found a market among the Israelites. And like Airbnb, Torah would enable them to belong anywhere: in the wilderness, in the Promised Land, and later in the Diaspora.

God knew Torah was the innovation to transform the ragtag group of wandering Israelites into the Jewish People. Torah would build cohesion and identity by establishing shared values like *bachmasat orchim*, welcoming the stranger, and *tzedakah*, shared rituals like Shabbat and Passover, and a shared language—Hebrew. There was no vetting process whereby the Israelites solicited proposals for the best covenant. They put their faith in Torah when they unflinchingly accepted the yoke of commandments. It was a moment of *na’aseh*—of pure action.

In the case of Torah, as with Airbnb, the culture came *after* the product. Only once they attained *nishmah*, and understood the great potential for their idea, could the Airbnb founders shape the company that would deliver it to the world. The same was true of the Israelites. Once they affirmed their commitment to the commandments, the *na’aseh*, they began the challenging journey of *nishmah*, of building the nation that would live Torah.

Tomorrow morning, we will read a selection from Deuteronomy in which the Israelites stand before God to make a covenantal oath that stretches through all future generations. God dictates that every single person may enter into this relationship observing the commandments and receiving blessing in return.

Anticipating that the Israelites might be intimidated by the lofty responsibilities of their *brit*, God gives them a pep talk:

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:16

יא כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה היום--לא-נפלאות הוא מקוה ולא רחוקה הוא יב לא בשמים הוא:
לאמר מי יעלה-לנו השמימה ויסקס לנו וישמענו אסה ונעשה יג ולא-מעבר לים הוא: לאמר מי
יעבר-לנו אל-עבר הים ויסקס לנו וישמענו אסה ונעשה יד כי-קרוב אליה העבר מאד: כפייה
ובלכבה לעשותו.

For this mitzvah, which I command you this day, is neither beyond you nor far away. It is not in heaven, causing you to say: "Who will go up to heaven on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?" And it is not across the sea causing you to say: "Who will cross the sea on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?" No, this is so very near to you—in your mouth and in your heart—that you can surely do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

Deuteronomy accentuates *nishmah*, the grappling. When the Israelites first receive the commandments in Exodus, they reflexively jump into covenantal relationship. Having roamed in the desert without a clear purpose or destination, they eagerly latch onto the blueprint of Torah. But three books later, by Deuteronomy, the extent of God's demands are clearer. There are ethics and morality, a rigorous justice system and a precise structure and service for the *mishkan*, the sacred tabernacle. There are rules for how the Israelites relate to other nations, and festivals and memorials that govern their calendar.

Torah is exacting and God senses the Israelites' uncertainty about fulfilling their end of the bargain. Offering them reassurance, God insists that the obligations of Torah are not in heaven or across the sea, but remain within reach. In truth, the *na'aseh* is meaningless without the *nishmah*. Living the commandments, just like inventing a start-up, grows increasingly formidable the more deeply we understand what is asked of us. The great journey of Torah is not the trek to the Promised Land, but the emergence of a People.

We are taught our whole lives to think *before* we act. *Na'aseh v'nishmah* flies in the face of this dictum by recognizing that action itself can generate understanding *and* identity. The promise to engage with our tradition—the *na'aseh*—can precede our grasp of it—the *nishmah*.

Many of us struggle to find meaning in the demands of Judaism. Our lives are so over-programmed that Shabbat, the commandment to rest, can feel like a burden. "Why," we challenge Torah, "must we cease from our routines to engage meaningfully with tradition?" We have so many events and relationships competing for our attention that skipping the Sabbath often feels like the lowest hanging fruit.

And why fast on Yom Kippur? Why should food matter when our hearts are turned toward hallowed tasks of *teshuvah* and self-assessment? It's uncomfortable and no one is really checking.

And why pray? Is anyone really listening? Do the desperate pleas ringing out from our disquieted hearts ever find Divine audience? Prayers for peace or healing or safety can feel futile in a world with such inordinate suffering. We'd rather not risk disappointment if our prayers are not answered.

Well-known author and psychologist, Wendy Mogel, began her Jewish journey in middle age as an "excursion into cultural anthropology". She describes attending Rosh Hashanah services with her daughter, Susanna, as akin to visiting the international mask and dance festival. She wanted to see

how Jews of West Los Angeles celebrated their ancient holy day.⁵ But Mogel listened to the prayers and found herself crying. She returned a second time for Shabbat and then a third, creating a regular practice, stumbling through candle-lighting, and eventually baking challah. There was no dramatic secret unlocked for Mogel's family as they incorporated the Sabbath. Susanna reflects, "It was always the same, which is what I loved about it."⁶

Shabbat gave the gift of routine. Carving out a Friday night ritual of prayers, dinner, and gratitude strengthened familial and Jewish identity. Living Torah became a soothing outlet in an anxiety-ridden world. Wendy reflects that her engagement with Judaism enabled her to spend more time with her daughters and less time worrying about them.⁷

Na'aseh v'nishmah exhorts us to try the Sabbath before assuming we have no time. Perhaps the space will surface the stillness missing in our chaotic lives. Perhaps we'll deepen relationships with the people we never have time for. *Na'aseh v'nishmah* challenges us to fast on Yom Kippur. Not because someone is watching, but because a day that demotes our physical desires may enable us to attend to our spiritual needs. *Na'aseh v'nishmah* dares us to pray, to exercise faith that articulating our hopes for a better world might be the first step in realizing them.

During these Days of Awe, we remember God's lofty expectations for us. We recite *Ashamnu* and confront the litany of ways we have fallen short. And then we receive our pep talk. God reminds us that the task of designing a better world, and being better to each other, is always within reach.

A great asset of Torah is its cyclical nature. *Every* year we are invited to renew our covenant with God, to create a start-up with the Holy One as it were, by affirming *na'aseh v'nishmah*. We can acknowledge that Judaism is extremely demanding and that God's intentions for us are not always clear. But so long as we believe that our actions can breed meaning, then wrestling with our tradition remains the fiercest kind of faith.

⁵ Emily Bazelon, "So the Torah Is a Parenting Guide?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 1 Oct 2006 [accessed 28 Sept 2017].

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.