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Erev Rosh Ha-shanah 5766  
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### The Circle Game

Referring to Torah, the Rabbis have said, “*hafoch bah, v’hafoch bah, d’cholah bah*--turn it and turn it again, for there is everything in it”. In envisioning what our Sages might have meant by this, I can’t help but connect it to the cyclical nature of our lives as Jews. Indeed, think of the number of things in our Jewish lives that occur in a cyclical or circular manner.

We refer to the cycle of the Jewish holidays, as we “go around the year” beginning with *Rosh Ha-shanah*, which we celebrate tonight and tomorrow. Each year on Yom Kippur we confess our sins and ask God and others for forgiveness. As the day draws to a close, we begin again with a ‘clean slate’. In a few short weeks we will celebrate the holiday of *Simchat Torah*, where we will literally turn the Torah from the final chapter in the book of Deuteronomy back to *Bereshit*, the story of creation in the book of Genesis. This literal turning is also symbolic of our conclusion every year of the reading of the Torah, and the immediate return to its beginning. This is an occasion for great rejoicing. Although lives of Jewish individuals are

linear--that is, a person is born and eventually dies--the cycle of a Jewish life, from birth through bar mitzvah, marriage and death, repeats itself over and over as individuals are born and die. We mark Jewish time by the cycles of the moon--each month representing one complete cycle. We can tell what time of the month it is by the size and position of the moon. Our liturgy praises God for the extraordinary in the very “ordinary” cycles of day and night, and their reliability in the order of the universe, with the phrase, “*gollel or mipnei choshech v’choshech mipnei or*--rolling day into night and night into day.”

Let’s look back at our original phrase from *The Ethics of our Sages*: “turn it and turn it, for there is everything in it.” Most commentators suggest that this phrase exhorts us to study a particular piece of Torah, and when we think we’ve gleaned from it every possible understanding, to “turn it on its head”--to look at it from yet another perspective--and it will yield even more. I would like to add another spin (no pun intended...) to this interpretation. If we understand the word “Torah” in the broadest sense of its Hebrew meaning, as “instruction” or “teaching”, then the phrase suggests that for each of us learning about our Judaism is not a linear process with a clear beginning and a clear end, but rather, a cyclical one, with multiple

entry points and a process which can continue over a lifetime. I hope that this interpretation is a source of comfort and relief to many among us. Our tendency is to look upon growing Jewishly and learning about our Judaism as a linear process--there is a finite amount of Jewish knowledge to be gained and we can amass it all within a certain period of time. We look with anticipation toward the day when we will have arrived "there" and be fully-educated Jews. As a third-year rabbinical student I am uniquely qualified to testify to the inaccuracy of this assumption! The more we learn, the more we become aware of how much there is "out there" that we can still learn. When I am ordained two and a half years from now, I assure you I will **not** know everything there is to know about Judaism. And here is where the relief comes in--we don't **have** to strive to know everything there is to know about Judaism in a finite amount of time. We have an entire lifetime to learn.

The process can be likened to visiting our favorite candy store over and over again. We often buy our old favorites such as Boston baked beans or Charleston Chew, but we also experiment from time to time with a new candy or a new flavor of jelly beans. We return to Torah study time after time--turning the phrases over and over, and gleaning from them new interpretations. And sometimes we experiment with learning something new,

such as Talmud, gaining familiarity with another genre of Jewish writing.

The analogy of a candy store is particularly appropriate for Rosh Ha-Shanah. Today, on the first day of the Jewish New Year, we greet one another saying, “*shanah tovah u’metukah* may you have a good and **sweet** New Year.” We dip apples in honey, so that the New Year may be for us a sweet one, and not a bitter one.

My wish for each of you as we begin this New Year, is that the year bring you health, contentment and growth in the sweetness of Jewish learning!

*Amen, keyn yehi ratzon.*