

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5773 Into the Void

The Voyager 2 spacecraft launched in August 1977, 35 years ago this past month. It has sent back some of the most incredible pictures of the planets that circle our sun. And 2012 has been the year that Voyager 2 left the bonds of our solar system at a speed of 35,000 miles per hour.

On the Voyager 2 craft, in addition, of course, to the many scientific sensors and transmitters, a Gold-plated record was sent on board. The record contains a message from us, to them—the intelligent life forms Voyager 2 might encounter on its thousand-million year journey. It's a time capsule that was intended to carry the story of our world to extraterrestrials.

Astrophysicist Carl Sagan led a team that decided what to put on the record. The team selected greetings in the 59 most populous languages on the planet. (And yes, "Shalom" did make the cut). Included also are recordings of the human heartbeat, the sound of brainwaves, and depictions of the human body.

The record also contains natural sounds of surf, wind, and thunder; the greetings of the humpback whale; recordings of Bach, Beethoven, and Blind Willy Johnson as some of the 27 musical recordings from around the world; as well as photographs and diagrams of all sorts to illustrate the best of human knowledge and experience.

They even helpfully sent along a detailed diagram of how to build and use a record player.

I remember a Saturday Night Live sketch in which Steve Martin plays a psychic who predicts that the cover of Time Magazine for the upcoming week will show the four words "Send more Chuck Berry," which supposedly had been sent from extraterrestrials to Earth the week before.

All kidding aside, this is such a romantic idea! Sagan and his team had room for 116 images and recordings on the Golden Record, in an attempt to encompass the best of our world. A great task they had, and a great honor, indeed.

It's Rosh Hashanah, our New Year. It's a time we're given to reflect on our actions, to make amends, to repent from our sins. We will do this communally in the coming 10 days, and we are challenged to do the individual work of repentance on our own as well.

We often focus on our sins this time of the year; how we've missed the mark; what we'd like to change.

On this Rosh Hashanah eve, just for a moment, though, I'd like to flip the script. Carl Sagan died in 1996. So let's say that we've all been named to a team to select items for

the next spacecraft—the Starship Shaliach-- headed towards our nearest interstellar neighbor.

Because technology has developed so much since 1977, we don't need to send a record limited to 116 tracks. We can send a thumb drive. We'll call it the CHAI DRIVE.

The CHAI drive has room for 4800 tracks, which, conveniently, corresponds to 3 tracks each for the roughly 1600 women, men, and children who are a part of Beth Haverim Shir Shalom. We've each got the privilege of placing three pictures or recordings on this thumb drive.

Of course, when we send this thumb drive out into the universe on the Starship Shaliach, we want to show our best selves to the extraterrestrials who might explore the contents of this CHAI drive. We want them to learn about our best attributes as human beings.

So let's imagine that you have a complete audio and video recording of your life from the past year (scary, perhaps!). For arguments sake, we'll call it your Digital Book of Life.

I am inviting you to review that recording and choose three moments from either your own life or an act you witnessed in the past year of which you are most proud. You are to submit a picture, an audio, or a video clip of each of those moments to be included on the interstellar thumb drive.

What would those moments be? And what would they say about you as a person, or about humanity?

I'm going to ask you to think now, for a few moments, as you sit here, about what you'd select. Now, the copyright owners for the images and music on the original Voyager Golden Record signed agreements which only permitted the replay of their works outside of the solar system, so if you'd like to put a similar copyright on one or two of your contributions, that's fine.

But after you think for a bit, I'd invite you to find someone in the room you did not have dinner with, and share ONE of the moments with them. Hopefully you can select one that you'd be willing to share with another person in the room. So again: three moments from your own life or an act you witnessed in the past year of which you are most proud. What would they be?

SHARE...

It's a romantic idea, the thought of the Golden Record, heading off into interstellar space, sending out a taste of the best that humanity has to offer, in the belief that we are not alone, and that other sentient beings might hear our shout out from this tiny spec on a spec on a spec of the universe.

And in the belief that maybe our descendants generations from now might get a message back.

But here's the thing: space is big. Really big. At a speed of 35,000 miles per hour, it will take Voyager 2 40,000 years to come within 1.7 light years of the closest star on its trajectory. 40,000 years, and then it will only be 1.7 light years away.

Alas, The chances that any extraterrestrial will actually find and play the Golden Record, illustrating the best of life on Earth, is exceedingly slim.

And here's the other bad news. We don't actually have permission to send the CHAI drive out into space. Budget cuts at NASA make it unlikely that it will be sent anytime soon.

But here's the good news. Unlike Carl Sagan's team members, none of whom will live to see the fruits of their record-making efforts—they won't live to get a response to their message in a bottle-- it's different for us.

Think once more about the three moments you selected, and what they illustrate about what humans can do when they put their minds to it. We can be (kind, compassionate, giving, generous, selfless...).

I've got breaking news tonight, from the world of religion. You can send that message, those moments, out into the world right now, starting today.

And you can get immediate feedback—no need to wait 40,000 years. You can know right away that someone hears your message, is impacted by your goodness, and you can even perhaps know that they pass that goodness on to someone else.

As we each examine the Books of our lives since last Rosh Hashanah, we need to look at what needs work, what needs improvement, where we went wrong. We must have difficult cups of coffee with those we've wronged, make difficult phone calls to people with whom we must beg forgiveness, send letters of apology we are overdue to send.

But we also have a chance to examine the better angels of our nature from the past year, all there, recorded for us to remember, if we wish. We have a rare chance to examine those moments when we hit the bullseye, when we said just the right thing, when we acted in what it must mean to act in the very imitation of God. We have a chance to recall, from personal dignity, from personal example, the best that is in us.

These are moments that can teach us, if we're willing to learn. These times when we were at our best in 5772 can help us be our best more often in 5773. They're the kind of moments that we'd be willing to put on a disk to show the universe what we can be, when we are acting in a way that we'd be proud to trumpet to the universe, save for our extreme modesty.

And they are the kind of times that, if we remember them as clearly we remember our sins, can help us make the world better because we're in it. The CHAI drive, the drive to live lives of wholeness and holiness, is strong in you. I can feel it.

All you need to read that drive is right here, in your heart, in your head, in the sacred text of your life, in your sacred Torah text, and in your sacred community. And you don't need the spaceship to send it out into the universe. You can be the Shaliach—the emissary—to bring goodness into a world that needs it so badly.

Let us begin. 3, 2, 1, shana tova.