

Shannah tovah. May we all be inscribed for a happy and healthy new year. There was once a non-Jewish guy named Michael who had a lot of Jewish friends and a Jewish girlfriend. Over time, he develops a deep appreciation for our way of life. So one day, he wakes up and declares to himself, "That's it! I'm going to become a Jew."

Later that day, he's told by all his friends that a proper, formal conversion takes at least a year of study. But he's made up his mind and so embarks on his conversion study. And for the next 18 months, he studies the Jewish tradition continuously from morning till night.

Finally, he feels that he's ready to apply to take the test and thus complete his conversion to Judaism. He's very, very excited. His conversion test day soon arrives and he goes to the appointed place where he is met by a rabbi. "*Shalom aleichem*," says the rabbi.

"*Aleichem shalom*," replies Michael. "OK," says the rabbi, "before we begin, I must inform you that my fee this morning for the 3 hours I shall be conducting the conversion test will be \$1000, payable in cash or check.

Michael says, "\$1,000? Are you kidding me? The most I'm willing to offer is \$500."

The rabbi says, "You've got a lot of chutzpah trying to make a bargain on the conversion test fee. And by the way, mazel tov, you just passed the test."

Chutzpah is a word that has become completely embedded in the English language. I typed the word chutzpah into Google, and out came an article from the Southern Baptists, the Southern Baptists, mind you, the least Jewish people on the planet, in which they accused the President of chutzpah. They probably

pronounce it hutz-puh, but the intent is clear. So this word is clearly one that you don't have to be Jewish to use.

The dictionary definition of chutzpah is "shameless audacity." But somehow that definition doesn't quite capture the richness of the word. As Jews, you already know the real definition of chutzpah. It's when a child kills his parents and then begs the court for mercy because he's an orphan.

But even that classic definition of the word chutzpah is incomplete. You see, there are two kinds of chutzpah, the bad kind and the good kind. The bad kind we all know about. Just open up the newspaper and you're guaranteed to read about at least one example.

For instance, Saudi Arabia wants to lead the United Nations Human Rights Commission. That's the same Saudi Arabia that recently posted eight help-wanted ads for the position of state executioner, no experience necessary. That's the same Saudi Arabia that does not allow women to do anything without their husbands' permission.

Saudi Arabia and human rights are antonyms, just like weight loss and Rosh Hashanah or Mel Gibson and the Jews. The Saudis have a lot of chutzpah to even suggest that they should lecture the world on the issue of human rights.

But what really demands our attention today is not the bad kind of chutzpah but the good kind. Chutzpah is a word that comes from the Aramaic word for sharp, chatseef. Now hold on, don't fall asleep on me, this is important.

On the one hand, chutzpah *can* mean insolence or irreverence. On the other hand, my Aramaic dictionary says it also means undaunted strength or perseverance. It is this second meaning of chutzpah, undaunted strength or perseverance, that I will be talking about today.

I'm going to tell you about this good kind of chutzpah as it relates to three things. First I'll talk about chutzpah in our personal lives, then I'll address the issue of chutzpah in connection to our Jewish lives, and then I'll talk about chutzpah and the State of Israel.

Chutzpah in our personal lives is extremely important. As Donald Trump would say, chutzpah is incredible, it's amazing, it's yoooj. Without chutzpah, we wouldn't make it. Undaunted strength and perseverance is needed for every serious challenge in life.

And we New Jerseyans have more chutzpah than people who live in places like Idaho and South Dakota. Our official state motto is "Liberty and Prosperity." I think we should change it to, "You talkin' to me?" or "What are you lookin' at?"

On a serious note, let's look at chutzpah in regard to health. A great many of us here have spent a large amount of time this year in the doctor's office or in the hospital or in a rehabilitation unit. And even if it wasn't your turn for the medical smorgasbord this year, you or someone you love probably experienced it recently.

If you've experienced serious illness, then you instinctively know that chutzpah, not laughter, is the best medicine. Why do you think some very sick patients feel relatively optimistic and even cheerful while other, equally sick people feel like curling up in the corner?

The answer, at least in part, lies in that person's chutzpah, the will to push through the painful, negative experiences and get on with the joy of life. In the non-Jewish world, the angel of death, the so called Grim Reaper, is a fearsome, monstrous entity.

Not for us Jews, though. Our malAKH ha-MA-vet, our angel of death is kind of stupid, easily confused, and can be manipulated with the right amount of chutzpah until death is unavoidable.

We Jews do not cower in fear at the thought of death. We fight, and we fight until there is nothing left to fight for. It takes real chutzpah to do that, especially when all the people in the white coats around you don't have anything hopeful to say.

Mind you, I'm not saying that chutzpah can cure disease, nor do I claim that it can prolong survival. After all, we don't want sick people thinking to themselves, "Oh, it's my fault I'm sick. If I could just snap out of this sadness, I could beat this disease!"

No, bringing your chutzpah to the hospital or the chemo unit is not about escaping death – that's impossible. Rather, chutzpah is about making the most of the time you've been given.

You see, chutzpah is a lifestyle choice. It helps us live with our health problems instead surrendering to them. Chutzpah is about squeezing every drop of life and letting none of it go to waste.

Let the doctors do what the doctors do. Maybe the doctor is right about the diagnosis, maybe he got his crystal ball in a box of Fruit Loops. Whatever the case, those with chutzpah will enjoy the life they *do* have much more. Rather than allowing the disease to govern their every moment, they go on living and celebrating.

Perhaps you saw the movie Independence Day back in the nineties. That's the alien invasion blockbuster starring Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum. It got no Oscars, but it was a great movie.

My favorite part is when Bill Pullman, playing the role of the President, gives a speech to the bedraggled human beings. He says, “We’re fighting for our right to live, to exist. And should we win the day, the 4th of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day when the world declared in one voice: “We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight!”

That’s what I mean when I tell you we have to have chutzpah. It means we fight for our lives, even and especially if we know the situation is dire. Our chutzpah shows the world and our loved ones what life is all about.

Every day during this season of repentance, we read Psalm 27 twice a day. In that psalm, we read the following words: Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear. Though wars threaten, I remain steadfast in my faith.

Whether it’s an army of personal problems or an army of cancer cells inside us, our chutzpah can help us make the most of our lives. We control our problems. We should not allow our problems to control us.

Now let’s look at the good kind of chutzpah from the Jewish perspective. We Jews have more chutzpah than any nation or ethnicity on Earth. We practically invented it. That’s why we’re still here and the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Nazis, and the Soviets aren’t. The radical Muslims are up next.

That old saying about Jewish holidays, “They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat?” That’s just another way of saying we have a lot of chutzpah.

But our chutzpah is not just a matter of national survival. It turns out that chutzpah is hardwired into the Torah and Jewish faith. Time and time again, the great people of the Torah show a talent for chutzpah and demand justice in the face of apparently doubtful odds.

Look at Abraham, who objected to God's plan to destroy the evil twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, because doing so would spell death for the few good people in town. It took an awful lot ofchutzpah for Abraham to say to God, "How can the judge of the entire planet not act with justice?"

Look at Moses, who said to the ruler of what was then the most powerful country in the world, "Let my people go! Sh'lah et ami!"

Rosh Hashanah itself is a festival of goodchutzpah. Look at us all lined up here as we begin the Ten Days of Repentance. Are we sincere about our desire for forgiveness this year? Of course we are! Are we apologizing today for exactly the same things we did last year? Of course we are!

It takes a lot ofchutzpah to keep doing this year in and year out, even with the best of intentions, and I for one am glad that God is much more forgiving than we are.

We even add the sound of the shofar to accompany the goodchutzpah. Sometimes I wonder if God hears the shofar and reacts to it in the same way I react to kids who blow those new years party toys over and over again every January. Does God think to himself, "Stop it, you blow that thing one more time and it goes in the garbage!"

Of course, the shofar's sound is not meant for God, it's meant for us. And we are careful to avoid the badchutzpah with a law concerning the animals that can provide the shofar. Only the deer, sheep, goat, and antelope families can give us shofarot.

Blowing a shofar made of a cow or bull's horn is not allowed because that would be a symbol of our ancestors' sin with the Golden Calf. Blowing a bull or cow horn would be a rather unseemly demonstration of badchutzpah, to use the very

animal of our sin to use on Rosh Hashanah. That would be like eating pork on Yom Kippur in the sanctuary, or what the Talmud calls “Going to the mikveh with a lizard in your hand.”

Jewish prayer itself is an act of chutzpah. At least three times a day, we’re supposed to open our mouths and hearts to God and remind the Holy One, as if a reminder were necessary, that we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Maybe it’s easier to remind God of your ancestry if you happen to be Alan Dershowitz, a great Jew and hero of mine. Maybe it’s easier to remind God of your ancestry if you’re Yitzhak Perlman or Seth Rogen, another couple of my favorite Jews.

But if you’re like me, just some guy trying to do his best in life, it’s harder to have the chutzpah to remind God who we are. It’s as if we’re saying to the Creator of the Universe, “Hey, don’t you know who I am?”

Fortunately for us, God does not care who we are. There is no such thing as a bad or unimportant Jew, and that is why we have the chutzpah to mention Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in our prayers.

Whether you are the Prime Minister of Israel or my late cousin who made a very modest living from gum ball machines, you are important in the eyes of God.

My favorite Talmudic quotation about chutzpah comes from tractate Sanhedrin, where we learn that Chutzpah is sovereignty without a crown. In other words, when you exercise the good kind of chutzpah that I’ve been talking about, you attain a kind of spiritual royalty. You may not have a crown except for the kind in your mouth, but you are a king or queen nonetheless.

One of the three major themes of Rosh Hashanah is Malkhuyot, God's sovereignty over the universe. The same idea applies to our own lives. We have to have the necessary kind and quantity of chutzpah to be the rulers of our own existence. Chutzpah gives us a backbone, and without a backbone, it is as if we are worms in the ground.

The last area of good chutzpah I would like to talk to you about today is the State of Israel, Medinat Yisrael, what we call reishit tzemihat geulateinu, the very first bloom of our redemption.

Talk about chutzpah! That Israel continues to exist as a Jewish state is partly miraculous, but we can attribute the lions' share of Israel's success to its unbelievable chutzpah, a will to survive that we just don't understand sitting over here with our peaceful neighbors and giant oceans.

Israel just keeps on ticking no matter what because Israelis understand commitment and drive. Most Americans don't think that way. We think commitment is something men are allergic to, and we think that drive is what a car does.

Chutzpah allows Israel not only to survive but to thrive and succeed. Professor Michael Rabin, who is recognized as one of the most important computer scientists in the world, attributes Israel's success in technology to sabra chutzpah, the native Israeli's tendency to never take "no" or "that's impossible" as an answer.

The first person to show this kind of chutzpah was none other than Theodore Herzl himself, who said, "If you want it badly enough, then it is no fairy tale." Im tirtzu, ein zo agadah.

Israel, of course, must deal with more than its share of the bad kind of chutzpah. While the world sees yet another humanitarian disaster unfold in the territory controlled by ISIS, what does the United Nations do? It sits on its overpaid backside and condemns Israel.

And that is why Alan Dershowitz says that American Jews need to have more chutzpah when it comes to talking about Israel. In his book appropriately titled, “Chutzpah,” Dershowitz says we are too chicken when it comes to supporting the Jewish state.

We’re afraid of being accused of dual loyalty. That, he argues, is an irrational fear. It’s a fear that has its roots in early and mid-twentieth century politics, things that just don’t matter any more.

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid that Joseph McCarthy will come back and say nasty things about us? Are we afraid that Father Coughlin will come back and restart his anti-Semitic radio program? Do our children and grandchildren even know who McCarthy and Coughlin were?

Instead of tip-toeing around like frightened house Jews, hemming and hawing when Israel is attacked, we should have the chutzpah to demand that the Jewish state receive the respect it deserves. And if I am attacked for being dually loyal, you know what I say? I say “You’re right that I’m dually loyal, so put that in your pipe and smoke it!”

I am dually loyal to America and Israel because the America I love and the Israel I love are tied together in history and values. That’s why it’s illegal to be dually loyal to America and ISIS, because American and ISIS do not share the same values. But my loyalty to Israel only adds to my American loyalty.

And that's why Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said that to be good Americans we have to be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we have to become Zionists.

I hope you'll leave today understanding that there is a bad kind of chutzpah, the kind that is sarcastic and cruel, the kind we need to avoid, and the good kind, the kind that empowers us to survive. We need that chutzpah for our health, we need it as American Jews, and our brothers and sisters in Israel need a strong dose of it as well.

I could talk for another twenty minutes, but then you'd say I have a lot of chutzpah. Shanah tovah to all of you.