The most popular book in our country is actually a series of books by J.K. Rowlings featuring Harry Potter and his young band of sourcerors and magicians, from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft. Harry and his friends live in an alternative reality where people who don't practice witchcraft are called muggles, and it is the muggles, those without magical powers that are missing out, whose narrow view of the world and what it might become limits the great possibilities that life has to offer.

Rowlings' trilogy depicts a world where good always conquers evil, where children are respected for their opinions, their insights and their contribution to society. The world of Harry Potter exists as a world within a world, though ordinary people, muggles, are unaware of it. Harry learns that success is not about abilities, or your *yichus,* family lineage, it is about the choices you make in life, what you do with the abilities you are blessed with, the things you stand for and try to be. The challenge to Harry and all his friends at Hogwarts is how to take the very best from their magical world and introduce it into the real world we all live in. If they can, if they can practice their magic openly in the streets and cities, using their powers for the betterment of people and society then there is a chance that they may forever change the world, make it as good, as fair, as just as we could previously only dream. For Harry that is what life is all about, using his magical powers, his mystically given abilities to make the world better for everyone in it.

We face the same challenge that Harry faces in his grand adventures, except we can't rely on sourcery and magic to accomplish our goal of making a better world, we must rely up ourselves, we must rely upon each other.

It is not unusual for a Rabbi to talk about a movie in a sermon. What is unusual is to talk about a movie before it has been released, perhaps before any of you have even heard of it. But I am going to do just that, because its message is so important, its idea so crystallizes what Judaism is working towards, what our challenge is on this High Holy Days, in this new year.

The film, 'Pay It Forward' is based on a book by Cathrine Ryan Hyde and it is about a boy who set out to change the world, one good deed, one mitzvah at a time. The main character is a twelve year old boy named Trevor. Trevor and his entire social studies class are given an extra credit assignment, their assignment, come up with a plan to change the world for the better. While many of his classmates laugh off the assignment, and a few embark upon small recycling projects and cleaning up local parks, Trevor dreams bigger. He dreams on the scale of the Torah and Jewish tradition, he dreams of world change, of a revolution in how we treat each other. Trevor dreams of a way to pay forward all that we have been blessed by others within life.

While Trevor and his plan, like Harry Potter are the work of fiction, we have an opportunity and I think an obligation to make his dream a reality in this new year. Trevor proposes that instead of paying someone **back** for a kindness that they have done for you, an opportunity they have given you, a skill they have taught you, you pay it forward to three other people. Doing for those three people, something big, something life changing, something empowering, something they could not do for themselves. In his own words he explains, if you have a lot of something then give some of that to someone else. And he is not only talking about money, he's talking about things that kids can do and give as well. In the book Trevor takes care of an elderly neighbor's garden, she then

pays his kindness forward by helping out others in the community. We can all think of things we can do for others, and maybe we can all think of people in our lives that can use our help. The janitor at our school who needs new tools from our old ones, the grounds keeper at the baseball field who could use some extra work on the side, the elderly woman on our street who would just like someone to talk with once in a while. Trevor's challenge, his mission, his goal is to actually change three people's lives in a lasting way. Those three people whom you have helped and empowered, they likewise cannot pay you back for your kindness, but instead, are challenged to pay it forward to another three. Trevor imagines that if his plan is put into action, in a matter of months the entire world will have done a good deed for someone else and have one done for them, at that point, the system keeps expanding exponentially and you have people who are getting paid forward a second and third time. And then believe it or not, you have what Judaism calls the messianic age, the redemption of the world.

In the catch phrases of Jewish tradition we call this idea *Tikkun Olam*, and it is based on the notion that that human beings are partners with God in the work of creation, that we have the power to make lasting change for the better to the world we live in. Perhaps we can't repair the world and all who are in it, in one big moment, but we can begin the process, we can repair the world piece, by broken piece, one person at a time, one to another.

The idea is so simple, *mitzvah gareret mitzvah*, one good deed leads to another, we think that it is the stuff of fantasy, the idealistic view of the Harry Potter's and Trevors of the world. But it if you have ever had your backpack or binder returned by a stranger when you thought it was lost forever. If you have ever been shown an

unexpected kindness by someone you didn't even know, if you have ever seen on the news or in person, people rushing into a burning car, crawling through a collapsed building, leaping into a storm wash to save a drowning person, then you know as I know, as Trevor knows, as Harry knows that it is possible, kindness can beget kindness, all that stands in the way is ourselves.

The question though on these High Holy Days, particularly this Rosh Hashana with its added sanctity of falling on Shabbat, a time when we are suppose to dream of the world we would like to create; the question is while our religion might be working toward perfecting the world, <u>are we?</u> Are we trying to bring about lasting change, to create that society that we all dream about; are we trying to change the world for the better? Because, I got news for all of us, that's what we have been praying about all this time, that's what we've been saying. That's what God expects us to be doing with our time here on earth, making this a better place for each other and those who will come after us. There is no greater purpose in life, there is no more central practice in Judaism. Our's is a religion and a way of life firmly rooted in the idea that to pay God back for the gift of the world, of the Torah, the blessings of family, health, happiness and love we must pay those same blessings forward to others. This is our covenant; this is our *brit* with God. We read in the Talmud, "The love of parents goes to their children, but the love of these children goes to their children" (Sota 49a). We can't pay God back for giving us the Torah and its guidance in life; we can only pay that blessing and insight forward to others. In doing so we honor ourselves, we honor our teachers, and we honor God.

In a few moments we will stand and recite the Aleynu prayer. We will rise and face the ark, its doors wide open, we will bow at the knees in reverence and in supplication and we will in the words of that prayer acknowledge that it is our unique task, our special blessing, as Jews, as individuals, as people of faith to help bring about a better world. We will stand, we will bow and we will say, "Eternal God we face the coming day with hope made stronger by the vision of Your deliverance, a world where poverty and war are banished, where injustice and hate are gone. Teach us more and more to respond to the pain of others, to heed Your call for justice, that we may bring nearer the day when all the world shall be one. *B'yom ha ho, yehi adonai echad.* On that day, O God You shall be One and all shall come to know you as One."

Ok, maybe it is too much to ask, maybe it is insane, maybe this is just a dream, the stuff of Hollywood and fiction. Trevor was asked the same question, isin't this an insane idea that you think you can change the world? He said quite correctly, "If nothing changes, nothing changes. If you always do what you always did, then you'll always get what you always got. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and everytime expecting a different result."

We are insane. We keep doing the same things over and over hoping for different results. We have to be courageous, have faith and challenge ourselves to do something different. At the end of this service you are going to be given a button, it says quite simply, don't pay it back, pay it forward. Wearing the button will be easy, living our lives as the button suggests is the hard part, but I have faith in each of you, perhaps more so because you see the world as Trevor sees it, you read Harry Potter and dream as we all

do, what if this was real. Let us make our dreams a reality, let us repair the world together.

I believe in a world that can be better, and I am no longer willing to wait around for it to happen. I pledge on this new year to change three peoples lives in a lasting way, I do so with the hope and intention that those three people will not pay me back, but will pay it forward to another three. I make this promise not as a rabbi, not as a Jew, but as a human being who believes that the world can be made better, three people at a time, if we only try. Join me in this promise, look closely at all you have been blessed with, all that you are thankful for, and Pay It Forward to someone else.