Shana Tova. Although whales are usually associated with Yom Kippur and the story of Jonah, this morning, I'm going to share the story of a whale named Lola. Lola the Whale was big - very big -, and lonely - very lonely. For years she had wanted nothing to do with anyone, and she had become sadder and sadder. Whenever anyone tried to get close to her and cheer her up, Lola would move off.

Many thought that she was the most unpleasant whale in the world, and they started ignoring her. They did so, despite the fact that old Turga, a hundred year-old sea turtle, told them that Lola had always been a good, kind whale.

One day, Dido, a young dolphin, heard the whole story, and decided to secretly follow the whale. She found out that Lola behaved very strangely. The whale would beat her mouth against the rocks, endanger herself by swimming between the biggest waves and the coast, and go to the seafloor and eat sand. No one knew it, but Lola had terribly bad breath because a little fish had got trapped in a corner of her mouth. This problem embarrassed Lola so much that she didn't dare to speak to anyone. When Dido realized this, she offered to help, but Lola didn't want to bother her with her bad breath. Nor did she want anyone to find out.

"I don't want them to think I have bad breath," said Lola.

"Is that why you've spent so much time away from everyone?" answered Dido, unable to believe it. "They don't think you've got bad breath, they think you're unpleasant, boring, and ungrateful, and that you hate everyone. Do you think that's better?"
Lola realized that her pride - and not letting anyone help - had created an even greater problem. Full of regret, she asked Dido to remove the remains of the fish in her mouth.

When this was done, Lola began speaking to everyone again. However, she had to make a big effort to be accepted again by her friends. Lola decided that never again would she fail to ask for help when she really needed it.

Jewish texts which focus on asking for help primarily fall into 3 categories: 1) Asking God for help, 2) Rules around lending money and returning lost objects and 3) Asking someone outside your community to help when you can’t ask your family or friends to help you. What these all share in common is that there are really only guidelines when the situation has high stakes: We’re alone and God is the only One we can turn to, we’re asking for money, and we’re asking for help from someone with whom we don’t have a strong relationship. Alternatively, Judaism sees asking your community for help with day-to-day things as part of what it means to be a community. It’s just what you do.

So why is asking for help today so difficult? Sometimes it is because we don’t know what it is that we need: If a situation is so new, so unfamiliar, so all-encompassing then we may be overwhelmed to the point that we do not have the capacity to ask for assistance. Particularly in moments of life transitions, these are the times when we can best support people by just showing up: with our presence, with a meal, with a ride. Today, these types of assistance may seem unnecessary – a person can order groceries on instacart, get meals brought by ubereats, or get a ride with lyft. What these technologies offer by way of solutions and in allowing ourselves to maintain appearances of being self-sufficient, however, they lack in creating a feeling of comfort, of being seen, of feeling cared for. And they reinforce the idea that we should be able to do things without asking for help – because no one in our daily lives knows we received assistance.

Brene Brown, research professor at the University of Houston and well-known for her TED talks and books about vulnerability, has found through her research that people tend not to ask for help for one of two reasons: either
they associate asking with feelings of shame of not being enough, or they associate asking with being perceived as being weak. (Palmer, Art of Asking, p. 175). The more people in a community don’t ask for help, the more people think asking is non-normative.

The Torah readings and Haftarah readings throughout Rosh Hashanah are filled with outrageously large, perhaps even chutzpadik, asks: Sarah asks Abraham to banish his son Ishmael and his mother Hagar from their home, Hannah asks God to grant her a child, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, God asks the people of Israel to have faith that better days are coming. It does not appear that any of the askers: Sarah, Hannah, or God, had any concern about being perceived as not enough or being weak.

When we think about the themes of the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, the idea of teshuvah, of doing better, immediately comes to mind. And as we know, we cannot engage in true teshuvah until we ask for forgiveness from those whom we have hurt, those whom we have wronged – whether intentionally or unintentionally. And though asking for forgiveness is different than asking for help, there is certainly a level of connection between the two. In both instances we are checking the limits of our relationship – how much can we make space for the other, give of ourselves to have the other in our life? Forgiveness takes energy; it takes a willingness to put aside what you wanted in the past, in order to create the possibility of future interactions.

And yet, the hours that we will be together beating our chests on Yom Kippur, those are only to atone for the ways that we have wronged God. For the ways which we have hurt one another, our tradition teaches us that we must ask those people directly for forgiveness – and that there is no time like the present. Furthermore, if we have hurt them so much that they are not able to pardon us right away, we are to ask them two more times for forgiveness. Judaism recognizes the difficulty many have with asking. If asking were easy, we would not need to be told how many times to ask for forgiveness.
The stories of Sarah, Hannah and God – regardless of what we think of the nature of their requests – come at a time of year when we need to be reminded that it is okay to ask for what we need. We may be tempted to convince ourselves that we don’t really need to apologize, to ask to be pardoned – either because the person has already forgotten about the offending act or on the other extreme, because there is no way our request will be granted. The readings from our tradition remind us that we should not answer no for other people, but rather give them the opportunity of stepping up and being there for us – perhaps even deriving some personal benefit from being asked.

Yes, sometimes that means that we will be disappointed and hurt. But if we don’t ask, we certainly won’t get what we need. And as we learn from Lola the whale, we may end up being judged in ways we hadn’t even considered – all while still not getting what we need.

When we ask and receive help, in addition to opening up our hearts and making ourselves vulnerable, we open up doors and possibilities for connections. As performance artist and musician Amanda Palmer writes in her memoir: The Art of Asking: “When you accept somebody’s offer for help, whether it’s in the form of food, [a place to crash], money, or love, you have to trust the help offered. You can’t accept things halfway and walk through the door with your guard up” (p. 158). This can be part of why it is so difficult to not only ask for help, but even to receive help when it is offered. Even if we have managed to avoid asking and perhaps can convince ourselves that we are therefore less likely to be seen as not enough or weak, there is still the piece about needing to trust the helper: that they will indeed follow through once we have shifted our expectations, that they won’t judge us negatively for accepting the offer even if we didn’t ask. This is true even for those times when we don’t ask for help because we don’t know what type of help it is that we need. Ultimately, asking for or receiving help means trusting that the other person, on some level, cares about you and your well-being. With such a high level of risk, it seems appropriate that the asks made during the Rosh Hashanah liturgy present a variety of scenarios and vulnerability with some pretty high stakes:

In the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Sarah makes herself vulnerable with another person, her spouse. In this case, she is literally asking Abraham to choose between her and someone else. Here, Sarah advocates
for her needs while Abraham remains totally silent. How would this story have proceeded if Abraham had asked for what he wanted, what he needed? Things may have played out in exactly the same way, but there would have been one key difference – Sarah and Abraham would both know how the other was feeling, how they could support one another, what sacrifices or compromises were made in an effort to support the other. It’s not fair for Abraham to assume that Sarah knew what Abraham wanted. We need to ask for what we need rather than expect others to intuitively know.

In the Haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Hannah makes herself vulnerable with God, herself, and Eli the priest, by praying for a child. How often do we build up barriers within ourselves by not being honest – even with ourselves – with what we truly need? Do we sometimes find it easier to make a request of someone we don’t know because the stakes are lower? Or is the act of vulnerability more challenging when we don’t have a prior relationship upon which to draw?

In the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, God makes God’s self vulnerable by asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Even if God didn’t expect or want Abraham to actually go through with it, like Sarah, God is asking Abraham to choose between two entities who he supposedly loves. What type of inner strength is needed to make such a request? And once again, Abraham does not ask for what he needs, modeling for us the risks that come with not asking.

And finally, in the haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, God makes God’s self vulnerable again by asking the people to have faith in God, to trust God – even when the people have already disappointed God. How often do we not ask for help or assistance because we have either already asked or we want our needs to be known without asking by this point in a particular relationship? How often do we not ask for help because we have been turned down before and cannot bear the thought of being rejected once again? By not asking, we only hurt ourselves.
Asking someone we love, being honest with ourselves, asking God, asking someone we don’t know. We are provided multiple scenarios of asking as a way to reassure ourselves that asking doesn’t mean we aren’t enough or that we are weak – it means that we are human. And if we, for some reason, think that we are above asking, we read about how even God asks for what God needs! Even when God has asked and been disappointed in the past. It seems that asking goes beyond being a universally human experience, to being a universal experience.

The process of teshuvah is not an easy one. It means self-reflection, asking not only for forgiveness, but potentially also for feedback so that we can truly change how we are in relationship with one another.

Just as important as asking, we are reminded on Rosh Hashanah of the importance of responding to an ask with grace and compassion. As difficult of a position as Sarah put Abraham in, there is no record of him lashing out at her. Eli offers supportive words when he realizes that he didn’t initially respond supportively to Hannah’s request. We are reminded of how we should check in with those who may also be impacted by our responding to a request: When Abraham goes to respond to God’s request of sacrificing Isaac, he does not speak with Sarah and their relationship is permanently damaged: they never speak again, and Sarah dies soon after the incident.

As Palmer notes in her book, sometimes you can’t give people what they want. But that doesn’t mean you can’t give them empathy and understanding. If you are asked something and cannot meet the request, there are still ways of responding that can minimize a person feeling bad. Remembering that even God makes requests, and how we would respond to such a request, may be a good starting point to guiding us.

As the title of Palmer’s book indicates, asking is an art – knowing the who, what, where, when, and how to increase the likelihood of our request being answered takes a certain amount of creativity and self-awareness. It requires the ability to imagine a world of possibility and of making one’s self vulnerable by sharing the ways in which we are not yet whole, the ways in which we are not able to be fully self-sufficient. But Judaism reminds us that we are not meant to be fully self-sufficient. Adam and Eve are created to be ezer kenegdo –helpmates for one another. The
Torah continues with stories of people asking for what they need and those needs being met, as well as with stories of those who don’t ask for what they need and how, as much as they may wish for their needs to be known, their nearest and dearest cannot anticipate their unspoken requests.

Perhaps one of the reasons we ask over and over and over again during the Yamim Noraim to be written in the book of life, is because our tradition knows that asking isn’t easy. By asking multiple times, we are able to practice asking, to become more comfortable with making our needs known, more secure in saying “I need help and can’t do this on my own.” Maybe the first step to being written in the book of life, in the book of redemption, in the book of prosperity, in the book of remembrance, in the book of forgiveness, is by asking to be written in these books. Which other books to we wish to be written in this year?

Who, in addition to God, can we ask to partner with us in creating this reality? When we are asked to assist someone in their journey, to which parts of their request are we able to respond yes, Hineni, I am here with you?

Avinu Malkeinu, please help us in asking for what we need. Grant us the wisdom to discern how we need assistance so that we can seek it out. When others grant us the gift of trust and ask us for something, bless us with the ability to respond with grace and compassion. In these ways, may we then be truly blessed with a shanah tovah, a good year. And let us say, Amen.