One of my teachers, Rabbi Ed Feinstein, has told the following story:

There once lived an atheist philosopher who went from town to town destroying the faith of the believers. No one could refute his sophisticated arguments or turn back his skepticism. At some point, however, the atheist grew bored of outwitting the townspeople. Instead, he announced he would challenge the great Rebbe to a public debate. Defeating such a spiritual master, he thought, would be his life’s crowning achievement and prove once and for all that there was no God.

Once the Rebbe’s disciples heard, they tried to warn their teacher about this atheist’s intelligence, wit, and powers of logic and persuasion. But the Rebbe continuously dismissed them, saying, “Let’s see what he has to say.”

The atheist confidently entered the town and went straight to the Rebbe’s chamber. There, the Rebbe sat, studying. Just as the atheist opened his mouth to begin his well-prepared, eloquent, argument he had worked so hard on, the Rebbe looked him straight in the eyes and asked him a single question: “Efshar? Is it possible?”
The atheist froze. “Efshar? Is it possible?” he repeated over and over. “Is it possible?” He soon fell to his knees and began to cry as he continued to repeat the question, recognizing he was defeated. “Is it possible? Yes, of course it is possible! It is always possible!”

*Ha'verāi,* my friends, we live in an interesting time. We live in a world of endless possibilities, where people can be more connected to each other than ever before. We know more about our planet than anybody in history and many of us have everything we could ever ask for.

Yet, as we realize the possibilities the world has to offer, we also realize how difficult it is for us to live with these options. We have the ability to connect with someone on the other side of the world, but we don’t know how to talk or truly listen to the person right in front of us. We are able to understand the human brain, but the number of people who suffer from mental illness is mind boggling. We are able to send a probe beyond the reaches of our solar system, but, like the atheist in the story, we are unable to see any possibilities beyond our own perception.

With all of the intellectual and technological advances we’ve made, with all of the opportunities before us, shouldn’t things be different?
Rabbi Feinstein has a compelling theory on why this is the case. He teaches that we live in a culture that clings to the ideal of individual freedom. Every person has infinite possibilities: he or she can choose what to be when he or she grows up, can choose what religion—if any—he or she wants to be, who—or if—he or she will marry, have kids, work or stay at home, what to eat, and, by virtue of how hard he or she decides to work, how successful he or she will be. This idea has been ingrained in us from our country’s beginning, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It was this ideal and the potential which comes with it which attracted many immigrants to this country, including many of our ancestors, who saw that in their homelands they were limited by being Jewish, but in the New World, all doors would be open to them.

However, Rabbi Feinstein explains, these possibilities don’t provide us with purpose, only pursuit of our own self-worth. They do not infuse our lives or decisions with meaning. We therefore are prone to feel disconnected and discontent. This is where Judaism can play a role. Judaism also puts a premium on the value of each individual. It asserts that each of us was created b’tzelem
Elohim, in the Image of God, and therefore has infinite potential. Or, as the Mishnah, the early third century collection of laws and rabbinic teachings, puts it, “One who destroys a life, the Torah deems it as if that person destroyed an entire world; one who saves a life, the Torah deems it as if that person saved an entire world.” But the purpose of this potential is not for us; rather, it’s for the good of the world. We are given a world of possibilities but are tasked with trying to make the world a better place, a united whole.

The analogy for this is the Garden of Eden, Judaism’s vision of Paradise. When we think of a garden, we imagine a peaceful, self-reliant ecosystem, where everything in it is vital. It is the perfect balance between natural and man-controlled: it grows on its own but needs humans to care for it and keep it from overgrowing. The first task God gives to humans in Eden is to care for that garden. Adam and Eve chose a world of freedom and possibility over one of peace and unity and were exiled. It is our task to try to regain entry to Eden. When we try to bring the world closer to being that garden—a peaceful, unified whole—we are succeeding in our God-given mission as people. It is this commitment to a larger ideal which provides meaning to our lives.
As we stand here tonight, at the dawn of a new year filled with all the possibilities of life, we reflect on the life each of us has been living. Have we been like the atheist, closed off to anything but our own point of view? Do we find meaning in our life? And as we look to the upcoming year, we ask ourselves what we are going to do to help transform ourselves into the Rebbe, someone who can see the possibilities the world has to offer and can change it into an Eden. That is our task during this High Holiday season.

*Efshar?* Is it possible that each one of us will be able to lead a life of meaning? Is it possible that each of us can change the world? Is it possible for us to live up to God’s expectations for us? Yes, of course it is possible. It is always possible!