

Erev RH Sermon

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RH 5781

Shanah Tovah,

There's a refrain that has punctuated almost every one of my interactions at Temple B'nai Abraham over the past few months - a refrain that began even as I was in the application process with this wonderful community, before becoming part of this already dynamic clergy team.

Ending conversations would usually go something like this: It was so lovely to be able to chat with you, and God willing, when this is all over, we'll be able to (insert activity here) in person. Grab a coffee, shake hands, hug, or simply be in the same room.

Texts like Exodus 33:11, "And God would speak to Moses face-to-face," have taken on new and profound meanings during this pandemic. Our sense of intimacy has expanded exponentially. These days, seeing someone face-to-face is nothing less than experiencing a divine moment.

Though I admit, I must've missed that class in rabbinical school where they prepare you for beginning a job in the midst of a global pandemic. Beginning a job, in the middle of a crisis, with no discernable end in sight.

We're together tonight, in our homes, entrenched in the tragedy, the loss, and the despair that has been the past seven months - trying to make sense of what has taken place, and what will come to pass in the days, weeks, and months ahead. These have been trying times for us all, from the youngest to the most senior in our society, no one has been immune to the changes we have undergone.

Our world has changed.

And yet, here we are again. Back to the same place every year. It's erev Rosh Hashanah, and on erev Rosh Hashanah, we Jews go to shul. Maybe we're not physically going to shul this year, but spiritually, emotionally, and in a deeply sacred way that words can't possibly describe, we are all together - perhaps more so this year than any other year before.

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of our year, is a day to celebrate the creation of the world, God's coronation as our leader, and intarpersonally, a day that, leading up to Yom Kippur, we begin exploring and imagining what our book of life for this coming year will read.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. We know this refrain. The problem is, we're still in the middle of the story. And that's what I'd like to focus on this evening.

How do we start over, when we're still in the middle of the story?

I'd like to begin at the beginning, kind of. Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz. The first line of the Torah - most often translated as "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. But what if this wasn't actually the beginning?

It's widely accepted these days in academic circles, and it's the opinion of Rashi for that matter, that the word Bereshit doesn't necessarily signal a beginning. A translation with more fidelity to the Hebrew form would be something like "When God began to create heaven and earth..."

It's a small adjustment, to be sure but it leaves open the possibility that our ancient creation myth might actually pick up in the middle of the story. A true timeline of events dissolves before us, and we're left with a series of actions that have given rise to millenia of commentaries and expansions of what the world might have looked like before our stated beginning.

Humanity itself, even if we are to take the metaphorical days of creation at face value, begins on Day 6. Placed in a world of vegetation and constellations, day and night, creatures of the sky and the water - we join the world in the midst of it all.

So too for us, we know what came before, what took place this past year. This Rosh Hashanah feels more like the sixth day rather than the first. Dropped into an unfamiliar world, left with choices and realities no one should have to experience. There were tragic losses, incomplete goodbyes, daily inconveniences. Six feet might forever feel like miles apart.

And yet, within this darkness, life has gone on, as it tends to do. One of the benefits of my job is having constant awareness of our community's lifecycle. Children have been born, bar mitzvah's celebrated, friendships: renewed and strengthened.

We have welcomed friends into the covenant of Judaism, we have said goodbye and memorialized loved ones as a community, and we have come together every Friday night and Saturday morning, collectively seeking refuge in our inverted reality.

Being in the middle of our reality, however, cannot and should not preclude us from seeking a beginning through Rosh Hashanah. And any new beginning revolves around cultivating a sense of hope.

In his remarkable address "Toward a History of Jewish Hope," Dr. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi traces the foundation and cornerstone of Jewish hope to Jeremiah 32. The events of this chapter occur in 587 BCE, one year before the destruction of the First Temple. Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonians; Jeremiah is in the palace prison for proclaiming destruction upon the city and the Temple, and the people are soon to

be exiled from the land. It is precisely within this moment of despair, that Jeremiah receives a divine oracle: Here in condensed form:

And Jeremiah said: The word of the Lord came unto me, saying: Behold, Khanamél the son of Shalum your uncle, shall come to you, saying: Buy for yourself my field that is in Anatot...And I bought the field that was in Anatot of Khanamél my uncle's son, and I subscribed the deed and sealed it, and called witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances....And I delivered the deed to Baruch the son of Neriah...And I charged Baruch, saying: Thus says the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: Take these deeds...and put them in an earthen vessel that they may continue many days. For thus says the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall yet be bought in this land.

It is, as Yerushalmi writes: the most absurd of all real estate transactions. The city is ill-fated, its people soon to be scattered, the Temple: God's earthly dwelling place, on the brink of destruction, and God instructs our prophet to invest in real estate. No down payment, no mortgage, no loan - Jeremiah pays in full.

This seemingly illogical act is the first in what Yerushalmi calls: the Jewish ability to endure the tension of waiting.

This is the ultimate expression and experience of being in the middle of the story.

Enduring the tension of waiting is not a passive state of being. When we are at the height of despair, we plant.

As protests and political revolutions unfold before our eyes, as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor have become household names in the most tragic of ways, our community plants for the future - organizing events aimed at raising our collective social consciousness, educating ourselves on issues of racial and economic injustice, listening to community leaders of color across the state of New Jersey, and acting: participating in a postcard campaign ensuring and preserving the right to vote for all, reaching out to community members to make sure no one is going through this pandemic alone, and supporting one another on dark days, when we feel the heaviness of that tension of waiting.

Or zarua latzadik, u'lyishrei lev simcha. Light is sown for the righteous; radiance for the upright. Our sages make the connection between light and the process of planting. Just as a tiny seedling may one day grow into a sprout, a shrub, a tree, or an entire forest, so too with light. Even the smallest amount of light, even the smallest amount of hope, of investment in the world as it ought to be, has the power to banish cynicism and despair.

Right before the Amidah this evening, we read from Psalm 81: Tiku vachodesh shofar, ba'keseh l'yom chageinu: Sound the shofar on the new moon, on our feast day when the moon is hidden.

We are used to our Jewish festivals taking place primarily on nights when the moon is full. Rosh Hashanah, however, as our sages make clear, falls out on the new moon. What do we make of this? On the surface, it makes perfect sense. New month, new year, new moon.

But the language here in this psalm is peculiar. Ba'keseh l'yom chageinu. Ba'keseh - mitkaseh - covered.

Sound the shofar on the new moon, on our feast day when the moon is covered.

On the night of a new moon, the moon is still there, but we just can't see it. The side reflecting the sunlight is away from us on earth, or as our sages would have it, the moon is covered. It is a transitive verb. It takes action to conceal light; it takes action to reveal light.

May we in this new year, a beginning in the middle, be blessed with hope. The hope that moves us to sow in tears and to reap in joy. May we reveal the concealed, and, from this new moon forward, may our blessings always be our light and our guide.

Shanah Tovah