

Rosh Hashanah Morning – 5778  
The Essential Goodness of the World  
September 21, 2017

It happened in the Old Country that there was an itinerant rabbi – Reb Israel, who would visit the town of Apta for Rosh Hashanah each year. On one such visit, the elders of the town asked the rebbe to preach in their shul for the holidays.

To their surprise, Reb Israel refused. When they asked him why, he said: “Last year when I came, you made the same request. I was only too happy to offer a sermon. But I am sorry to say that I accomplished absolutely nothing by doing it. Things here are exactly the same today as they were a year ago – nothing has changed. Apparently, nobody heard a word I said. Why should I waste my breath?”

The people of Apta were devastated... Actually, they were insulted. They were insulted and devastated. Could it be that the rabbi’s sermon had fallen on deaf ears?

As word of the rebbe’s harsh rebuke spread swiftly through the town, the people of Apta fell into a deep depression. Finally, a villager asked to meet with Reb Israel.

“I am neither a scholar nor a saint,” the man said to the Rabbi, “but I can say that you are mistaken about your sermon having no effect. I listened to what you said last year. You encouraged us to do what is written in the Psalms – “I place You, O God, before me forever – I am ever mindful of Your Presence.” (Psalm 16:8) From that moment on, I have sought to do just that. The Name of God is constantly before me, revealed to me as black fire written on white fire – I see God in every person I meet and in everything I encounter. I live in awe of God’s presence.”

The Rebbe smiled at the man and apologized to everyone for his hasty rebuke. “If one heart was opened last year, perhaps two will open this year.” And he agreed to preach for the New Year.

My friends, I stand humbly before you, and I eagerly and unconditionally agree to offer you a sermon for this seventeenth year as your rabbi. I truly do not know how many of my words you have heard over the years, or how many you have taken to heart. I pray that I have given some of you a bit of insight, and still more of you words of comfort. It would please me if most everyone in this holy congregation has gotten a sense of the meaning and the beauty and the joy I experience every day in Judaism and Jewish life. If over the years I have accomplished that much, I can find the strength or at least the audacity to offer you a few words, one more time, as we celebrate these Days of Awe.

Over the past sixteen years, I have given more than 60 High Holiday sermons from this bima. In the first year, just days after 9-11, I spoke about comfort and hope. Since then, I have tried to make the case that our tradition obligates us to act for social justice. I urged everyone to forge personal relationships with the land and people of Israel. I taught you six criteria from the Talmud for a life well-lived. We

talked about developing a personal Jewish theology that works for you. I offered a portrait of the beauty and power that Shabbat brings to our personal and communal lives. We talked about judgment, repentance, *teshuvah* and forgiveness. I have offered insights about relationships and I read a love letter for our teens. I shared my personal struggle to hold joy along with sorrow, and I talked about community and community and community, over and over again.

They say a rabbi has only one sermon. Unlike Reb Israel, I know you have heard my sermon. It is very simple. I can boil it down to three short sentences:

**I believe that God exists, not out there somewhere, but in all being. The oneness of God is reflected in the oneness of the entire universe. As a part of that oneness, animated by the divine spark, we are called on to recognize the goodness of all creation and instill our world with holiness.** – That’s it.

### **Bereshit - The Essence of the World is Goodness**

I believe that goodness is the essence of the world. Yes! I am saying that the world is essentially good – in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

That said, the challenges we face are real. We all experience pain and adversity, and sometimes we even suffer. However, if you focus only on adversity, adversity is all you’ll experience. Focus on the good and you stand a decent chance of experiencing the good, be it through beauty, joy, success, or happiness.

As I said, I believe that goodness is of the essence of the world. Embracing this idea is the beginning of faith. It is the foundational teaching of our Torah.

You know the text well: *Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim v’et ha-aretz* – God began to create heaven and earth...”

Day One: God starts creating, and God creates light. And God looks at the light and God can’t make another thing until God says, “Wow! That light, it’s good!” Good!

Day Two: Not such a great day, apparently. Lots of separating going on, but nothing really new in the world. Day Two is the only day of creation that God doesn’t declare something good.

Day Three: God gathers the waters. And God looks at the waters and God says, “They’re good!”

Day Three again: A doubly good day. God makes vegetation of all kinds, and God looks and says: “Good!”

Day Four: Stars are good.

Day Five: The birds and beasts are good.

Day Six: Another doubly good day. Domestic animals are, guess what? Good!

Then human beings arrive on the scene, and finally, God looks at all that God has made, "*Vayar Elohim et kol asher asa v'hiney TOV MEOD!*" Look! It is VERY GOOD!"

Seven times over seven days of creation, God looks at what God has made and declares it GOOD. *Good!* Think about it for a second: Of all the ways God might have described creation, God calls it good! Not big, not beautiful, not awesome, wondrous or grand, but good! The world and all that's in it was created to be good. Goodness is the essence of creation.

This, my friends, is one of the most audacious claims of our tradition – that the world is good. No other creation story attests to it, or even hints at it. Quite the contrary, the ancient stories of the origins of the universe make it clear that the world is not good. It is violent and chaotic; it was created by warring gods as a random act of capriciousness. Why, even our modern creation story known as the Big Bang Theory leaves me cold – with its certainty of the meaninglessness not only of my life, but of all existence. From a purely scientific perspective, the world is neither good nor bad. It just is.

Of course, I believe in science and I believe in the Big Bang. But I am glad I have another story that I subscribe to as well, and that is our story. Because I do believe that the world is good, and that people are basically good, and that life is actually pretty awesome most of the time, or at least that's the way it's supposed to be.

Yes, I know – the challenges are real. Suffering is no illusion. I know that many of our members experience chronic illness, the loss of loved ones, economic hardship and all manner of adversity in their lives. Outside of our community, there is much to be anxious about: ISIS is a real threat. Racism and Anti-Semitism in our country and around the world are dangerous. Unrest in Israel, Syria, North Korea and even Western Europe puts us on edge. Don't even get me started on Washington. How can I not worry about these things? I do. AND in spite of it all, I still believe the world is fundamentally good. Life and love and beauty and joy prevail in spite of it all.

### **A Tree, a Rock and The Path**

Two decades ago, when I was younger and we lived in NY, I used to love to go mountain biking in the Shawangunk Mountains. My bike carried me over carriageways and single-track paths through dense hardwood forests and to waterfalls that dance in the sunlight. I loved driving my bike hard, tearing along sheer cliffs and ledges, occasionally stopping to take in the beautiful views of the Hudson Valley, or to picnic by the cool waters of one of the preserve's fine, crystalline, sky lakes.

It was during these wonderful excursions that I learned a powerful life-lesson that I have shared with many people since. It is all about choosing to see the good in life, and giving it as much of your attention and energy as you can.

You see, I was a novice mountain biker, and I never got really good at it. I was okay on the wider carriage roads where there aren't many obstacles and the grades are moderate by design. But the narrow, single-track paths are way more exciting – they take you 'round sharp turns, up and down steep hills and over logs and large rocks. The most challenging routes are often the most fun. They drag you through creeks and streams, swampy marshes and into the mud, lots of mud.

Oh yes. The life-lesson: The path is sometimes hard. It is loaded with obstacles. Up ahead, you see a sturdy, old oak tree on the left and a massive boulder on the right, and the narrow trail squeezes right between them. I learned the hard way: if you focus on the tree, you will hit the tree. If you stare at the boulder, you will likely hit that boulder. I learned this lesson - many times. The key to navigating life's challenges is to look at the space between the obstacles. You must always focus on the good.

### **Every Blade of Grass Testifies to Goodness**

Focus on the good. If you try, you can find it all around you. Think about this for a minute. You are walking along the sidewalk and you happen to see a crack in the pavement. In the crack, as if it had no better place to be, blades of grass sprout up out of the concrete, reaching for the sun and drawing nutrients and water from God knows where. And you think: How amazing is this! How tenacious life is! We build and pave all we like, adding layer upon layer of concrete and macadam. Yet, sooner or later, life breaks through and finds a way to take hold. The tender shoots exploit minute gaps, and life asserts itself where a desert of blacktop would otherwise hold sway. Life force insists. It is, in fact, this insistence which is of the very essence of life on this teeming planet. This insistence of life — the goodness of life — is what gives us hope. Every single blade of grass testifies to the goodness of our existence – indeed, of *all* existence.

That's our job too – to testify to the goodness in our lives and in our world. It is the first commandment of religious life. And you can only testify to the good by focusing on the good.

Focus on the good, and good will become all that matters.

There is a beautiful path – the path of life. It leads you toward untold dreams and wonder. The path is sometimes hard. It can be loaded with obstacles. There are trees and boulders. But the way through is clear and good. Focus on the good, for goodness is the essence of the world, if, with God's help, we make it so.