

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781

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Thank you Rabbi Small for always inviting me to speak on this second day of Rosh Hashanah. What an honor and delight to be with you welcoming the New Year.

I would like to tell you a story: There are several men in the locker room of a golf club, cleaning up after eighteen holes in the hot sun. A cell phone rings and a man engages the hands-free speaker function and begins to talk. Everyone in the room stops to listen.

He says: Hello.

She says: Honey, it's me. Are you at the club?

He says: Yes.

She says: I'm at the mall now and I found this beautiful leather coat. It's only \$1,300. Is it okay if I buy it?

He says: Sure, go ahead if you like it that much.

She says: I also stopped by the Mercedes dealership and saw the new AMG 63S Sedan. I really like it.

He says: How much?

She says: \$75,000

He says: Okay, but for that price, I want it with all the options.

She says: Great. And one more thing. The house we wanted last year is back on the market at a reduced price. They're asking only \$2.3 million.

He says: Well, go ahead and give them an offer, but start at \$2 million.

She says: Okay. I'll see you later. I love you.

He says: Bye, I love you.

The man ends the conversation, looks up, and all the other men in the locker room are looking at him in astonishment. Then he smiles and asks: Anyone know whose cell phone this is?

Friends, we are on the threshold of a new year, 5781. It may be a rocky start, so we come to pray for a better year; we hope the Coronavirus that infected so many people will be stopped and our afflicted world will begin healing.

Rosh Hashanah is a time to reaffirm, reconnect and rededicate ourselves to our individual roles, to our communal mission and journey of bringing light, healing and repair to a fractured world.

I was recently asked a question: “Why be Jewish?”

The answer is because we the Jewish people believe in Torah and faith and hold onto hope - the idea that not only can things get better, but we have a direct hand in making things better. We look forward to what is possible and how the world can become better.

Then there is the second question.

What makes up the Jew in you?

History is knowing what happened in the past - memory is asking yourself what those past events have to do with who you are today and how that will influence who you are tomorrow. It is our families who matter most, and all Jews are an extended family. Not only do we call ourselves family, but the Torah refers to us Bnai Yisroel - the children of Israel, focusing on the family.

But if that is not enough to convince we really are a family, let me point out one thing. A convert to Judaism is called a Jew - ישראל על פי שחטא - ישראל. A Jew who has denied his faith, he is still a Jew - you cannot get out, you are stuck with us!

That is family. Being a part of a family demands sustained involvement and effort. A family requires communication and cultivation of shared

experiences. And most importantly we need to connect our individual memories to the collective memories of our extended family. Our families will always be there to support us.

One Chassidic Rabbi has noted the word 'Oneg' 'delight' is made up of the same letters that make the word 'Negbah' 'affliction.' What is the difference between the two he asks? It is where you place the 'ayin' - the eye. If you direct your attention to the world situation, taking an active interest in every aspect of life, then it will be a delight. But if we don't get involved - what's life all about? Then the Ayin only comes at the end. Then it is too late- then one has affliction. What we need is to invest more energy, more involvement to have the possibility of success. On this Rosh Hashanah we have a big challenge facing us, namely the Coronavirus. How we respond to this plague will determine the future of our families and the future of our people.

We recognize God did not create a perfect world, but rather gave us the responsibility to be God's partner in perfecting it. We begin with fixing ourselves and then we in turn keep our community. Finally, we begin Tikkun Olam B'malchut Shedao-- to repair the world in the Kingdom of God.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of remembrance. We turn to the Almighty to have mercy on us. The essence of remembrance is 'Chesed'-- lovingkindness. Not only do we seek God's kindness but also the means to arouse the sense of lovingkindness in ourselves to commit ourselves to kindness, charity and to follow His virtues. Even as He is merciful, so shall you be merciful as He is King, so shall you be King.

What animates me personally as your Rabbi is that every individual must be infused with a sense of purpose and mission to make this world a better place for everyone, and to do it with an unflinching devotion. Let us remember always, remember what we *are* is God's gift to us. What we *become* is our gift to God.

Rosh Hashanah is here with new goals, new hopes, new resolutions, and a new purpose in our lives. It is incumbent upon all of us to do our best to make a more peaceful world to be involved in the healing; healing for the betterment of all people and to be pursuers of peace in a troubled and often violent world. If we don't stick together we will fail together. Don't be shy and don't be afraid. Stand up for what you believe.

Many people are quite pessimistic about this era in which we live. We live in an age which is lacking idealism--an aimless and purposeless age. An age which is drifting helplessly to some unavoidable abyss. This pessimistic mood is prevalent because there is a crisis in the world.

In times like this we need the spirit of the Almighty to uplift us and to do what is right and not be afraid. Rabbi Nachman taught us that the world is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is not to be afraid. As we cross the bridge we keep our eyes on the other side. There is also the narrow bridge of our own personal lives and dealing with the future. Whatever challenges you face in life, you can cross the bridge, if you let go of your fears and hold onto hope.

So, the question is - What is your wish and mission for the next year? If you had just one wish to present to the Almighty for the coming year, what is it that you seek?

When we reflect, it seems as if there are so many things we might request.

1. An end to the pandemic
2. Good health
3. A better economy
4. Personal wealth and prosperity
5. More jobs for those out of work

6. More effective and efficient government
7. An end to crime and violence
8. Cures for cancer and dementia
9. An end to heart disease
10. An end to oppression

...as well as end to the countless other illnesses that strike humankind all the time. The more we reflect, the more we would need to add to the list. But if you could have one request from God, what would come first?

Reading the Torah for Rosh Hashanah is another example of the blinding power of fear. Hagar and her son Ishmael are banished from the home of Abraham and Sarah, but God hears their cries and sends a messenger who calls out to Hagar, אל תראי 'Al Terae'--Do not be afraid.

The Days of Awe are all about risk taking. Do not be afraid. Out of vulnerability comes strength, out of failure comes growth. Only when we risk can we succeed and prosper.

Have you ever been blinded by fear? Like Hagar, are you too afraid to see the hurdles before you? Too scared to apologize when you know you were wrong? Too fearful of speaking up in defense of someone?

A person should be true to his word because the existence of the world is in danger. God created the universe through words. He reveals himself to his people in words. He makes a covenant with us in words. The last and culminating book of the Torah is Devarim- Deuteronomy "Words." By the way, the Hebrew word 'davar' also means an event, a happiness. Something that generates momentum in history. If the greatest thing God does is speak, then the greatest thing we can do is listen.

What we are witnessing today is the gory illustration of violence which strikes at the very heart of mankind. A world wrecked by oppression, destruction, poverty and social injustice is the result of rape, murder and wanton desire. Terrorists, anti-Semites - the world is heading toward

anarchy. If the international community would have been organized differently, this pandemic could have been stopped in its tracks.

Judaism is realistic about life. Self-deception does no good. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we make a Cheshbon Hanefesh - taking stock of our spiritual estate--we remember how temporal life is, especially during this crisis. Rosh Hashanah comes to emphasize the preciousness of life. If to date we have been merely wandering through life without direction and purpose, this is the time to redirect ourselves. Life is too precious to waste--too valuable to regret what we left undone.

I worry American Jewry is becoming blinded by fear. We need hope, not fear. Due to rising anti-Semitism, our challenge is to create a Jewish renaissance with a focus on security, the promise of freedom and the hope we will live in peace. We risk allowing our fears to overshadow our dreams and to step back into a “Judaism of survival.” That form of Judaism cannot survive. Liberty and freedom from oppression are not things that are automatic. They require action, courage and fearlessness. America was built not on fear, but on hope. An America that looks across the bridge and doesn't see danger but possibilities. An America that is inclusive projects optimism, and is built on dreams.

The Midrash Rabbah (Eccl 3:3) narrates that once Rabbi Simeon ben Halafta attended a circumcision. The father of the child said, “Drink some of this old wine and I trust in the Lord that he will grant me to offer you a drink at his wedding feast.”

They all responded: “Amen! As you have brought him into the covenant of Abraham, so may you bring him to Torah and the marriage-canopy.”

Rabbi Halafta then took his leave. Outside the house he met the angel of death who looked very agitated.

“Why do you look upset?” the Rabbi asked him.

“Because of the behavior of humans,” he replied. “The child you circumcised today was fated to be taken away from here by me when he would be 30 days old. But his father gave you wine and said ‘Drink this wine, for I trust in the Lord that he will grant me to offer you a drink at his wedding feast.’”

“I heard this and grieved,” continued the angel of death, “for when you answered Amen and L’chaim, your prayer annulled the decree against him.” G-d decrees, but the Tzaddik, the pious person nullifies it (Moed Katan 16b.) Therefore we say ‘L’chaim,’ may we live long and not suffer from any evil decrees.

Do you know what the Hebrew word is for trust? Emunah. The shorter version of the word is “Amen.” Three letters which spell out Kil Mel’ech Ne’amon - God is King. You trust every time you say Amen. You say, I trust in you God. God trusts us and He wants us to bring truth and justice to the world - not deception and corruption. He wants us to be strong and united.

May we fulfill His wishes and may He hear our prayers.

May the New Year be without fear and grant you and your loved ones blessings of joy, health and peace. Amen.