

Finding Our Way
Rosh Hashanah 5781
September 18, 2020
Rabbi David Stern

Shana Tova everyone! To those who are participating in this service on Friday night, September 18, 2020, you are living proof: the High Holidays have not been postponed this year. Somehow, the Jews have gathered to (somehow) usher in the new year 5781. From living room couches and kitchen counters, alone or amidst family, we begin to find some sweetness and we pray, some mooring, in these storm-tossed times.

True, you are not in your usual spot in the chapel or the Sanctuary, not with your usual neighbors in Tobian or fellow singers in the choir loft, and how we miss the hugging; but this year, you didn't have to show up two hours early, and the parking was a breeze. Tonight marks the beginning of a High Holiday season unlike any we have experienced, as we join together on this journey of experimentation, introspection, challenge and hope.

We have gathered amidst profound difficulty before. In the last two decades alone, we ushered in Rosh Hashanah while the ashes of 9/11 still stained the sky. We have gathered in other contentious election years, in other economic crises, in war and peace, when Israel was secure and Israel was threatened; when our values felt secure and when our values felt threatened. And that short litany does not begin to consider Rosh Hashanah in the camps, or in the Gulag, or in hidden basements where we blew out the candles as soon as we said the blessing.

We Jews have wandered not only the map of the world, but for millennia, we have trekked the span of time. Yes, Rosh Hashanah is the taste of apples and honey and the sound of

the shofar, but most of all it is a promontory, a lookout from which we scan the world as it is, and having surveyed the landscape, however challenging it might be, we do what we have always done: we find our footing, we choose our way, and we continue our people's age-old journey towards a horizon of decency, compassion, justice and peace.

Sometimes the signposts are confusing. Sometimes, as on any family trip, we argue about directions. And sometimes we feel alone on the way. But as our sages taught, *ha-adam nikra mehalech* – the human being is called “one who walks,” because only the angels stand still in their service of God.¹ For us, there is always another rung to be reached: of compassion, of humility, of courage.

Long before our Apple watches and Fitbits counted our steps, God simply said *Lech Lecha* – keep moving, no matter how confusing and uncertain the terrain might seem. Keep striding and striving, because there will be years at Rosh Hashanah when cynicism crowds the path; when resignation is gaining on you, or confusion, or despair; and you will be tempted to sit out this leg of the journey. But only the angels get to stand still. *Lech Lecha*, God said to Avram and to us – find your footing, choose your way.

And so to the landscape – oy. We gather for Rosh Hashanah 5781 in a world defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. For months, many of us have been struggling – some with loneliness and isolation, others with the juggling act of having everyone home, and many with both, and all the overwhelm it brings. We are somehow bored and exhausted, stressed by the confinement that we know will help keep ourselves and others safe. We are working from home or laid off from work; managing online education for second graders and college sophomores alike.

¹ Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *Sefat Emet*, on *Parashat Lech Lecha*. In *The Language of Truth*, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1998). Passage 3 on p. 6 in Hebrew section of volume; passage 3 on pp. 22-23 in English section.

And how powerful the grief we have felt. We have lost loved ones to the virus. We have been unable to visit family members in the hospital. We have felt the deep pain of distance at times of loss and joy. We miss each other.

Yes, we have adapted too – B’nai mitzvah and weddings have still been sacred and joyous, and Zoom minyans and memorial services have brought genuine comfort, as technology has allowed people to join us on screen from all around the world. But the truth is, for all the neat rectangles that surround our faces on the Zoom screen, nothing feels neat or clear at all. COVID has confronted us with mortality and limitation, and undermined our confidence in both personal well-being and national purpose. So how do we find our footing now?

The truth is, we’re already learning the answer. Crises can be clarifying, because when all of our routines implode, we start to discern what really matters. When we can’t run out to restaurants all the time, we relearn what it means to have the whole family at the dinner table. When we don’t dash around to concerts and programs and meetings, we relearn what it means to walk around the block at evening, or to Zoom with faraway friends. When we can’t spend so many of our waking hours on airplanes, we actually start to notice the sky.

What we’re relearning thanks to the pandemic is the answer to a very old spiritual question: what matters? What are the Jewish verities that help us choose our way, even when the path ahead is shrouded in uncertainty? I’ll share four with you tonight – points on a Jewish compass for the challenges ahead.

Verity #1: Slowing down is a mitzvah. The Torah puts it a bit more bluntly in the fourth commandment: *zachor et yom hashabat l’kadsho*² – remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

² Exodus 20:8

But why make a day of rest a commandment? Because enforced rest reminds us that we are neither in charge nor indispensable – the world will continue to spin on its axis even if I don't answer the next email, and we participate in a precious world of creation much greater than ourselves.

But remembering Shabbat is about more than ceasing from work when the sun sets on Friday night. It is about bringing Sabbath consciousness into every day. It is about slowing down, because in slowing down, we pay attention – to the realm of our relationships, to the world of nature, to our own breathing.

When we can't scramble as readily for the next brass ring, we start to see what is shining all around us – on a sunset walk or in the eyes of a child. Without a doubt, the pandemic has added plenty of stress to our lives. But it has also been one huge pause button, one steady drumbeat of Sabbath possibility. I pray that we will remember to stay slow even once life picks up again. And so verity #1: remember the Sabbath day, and its possibilities in every day.

Verity #2 is a truth as old and grand as the Psalms, as wise as the proverbs, and it's simply this: the potential for spiritual connection surrounds us in every moment. The Psalmist spoke of God's majesty in the starry sky. The teacher in Proverbs challenged us to sense divine possibility on all our paths in the world.

Now I know we sometimes refer to our places of worship as God's house, and I am not trying to put our own stunning building out of business – we all miss its beauty, and the beauty of being here together. But what have we relearned in this pandemic? That God's house is everywhere. That the blue jay and the cardinal on the same branch in my backyard are a prayer. That a kid singing in the bathtub is a psalm. That a kiss on the forehead from someone who has been with you through thick and thin is a touch of the holy. That a walk on a mountain meadow

trail is a meditation, if we intend it to be, and stay off our phones. And that the Kaddish recited on Zoom still brings an echo of comfort and hope. The old religious school line that God is everywhere isn't a cliché, it's a challenge – can I sense the holy on the everyday path, even in its rough patches? And so Verity #2 – there is spiritual possibility in every moment, around every corner, if only we can see it.

Verity #3: We are fundamentally interconnected as human beings in God's creation. The evidence is in how we have struggled with isolation and quarantine, how unnatural it feels to stand six feet apart and see only half of each other's faces. We are not wired for this – we are wired for its opposite: Connection. Community. Covenant. We saw it every time one Temple member called another just to check in during this year of challenge. We saw it when an ECEC Mom who was nursing a newborn lost power at home because of the tornado, and was worried that all the breast milk she had pumped would spoil, and knew she could count on Temple to keep her milk in our walk-in freezer. We saw it when one of our families with special needs children asked if they could use Temple's long hallways to help their beautiful three-year old daughter learn to use her walker.

No Jew is an island. As the Jewish people, across space and time, we are bound in shared responsibility and shared destiny. From Mt. Sinai, where we enter the covenant as a community, to the confessions of Yom Kippur, which we make in the first person plural, to every ethical precept of the Torah and every cry of the prophets – we exist in a web of mutual responsibility with the capacity for great love – for this people, and beyond this people. Because the Oneness of God establishes the oneness of human destiny and human responsibility.

And so to the fourth verity, which shines bravely from the heart of our tradition onto the difficult path before us. Justice. Tzedek. The justice Isaiah will call us to on Yom Kippur

morning – the justice that requires us to recognize the dignity of every human being, to lift up the needy and enfranchise the excluded, no matter how far they have been distanced from power and influence.

To see the sins of society, our society, and name them. To see those who have suffered in this summer of outcry against racial injustice, and name at least some of them: George Floyd. Breanna Taylor. Jacob Blake. We have spoken similar names at this season before, and now we say theirs, because they belong in a place of sacred reckoning, not just on twitter feeds and pundit panels, not just as symbols or street banners. They belong here, where Sinai still beckons, because here we are called to justice and to account: for all the ways in which our American society has fallen short of Judaism's insistence on the sacred value of every human being.

Shma: we are summoned to listen for God's Oneness as it is manifest in Jews and in Muslims, on the left and the right, in white folks and brown folks and black folks. In every one of God's creatures, in their centuries of pain, and in the simple unassailable assertion that black lives, their lives, matter. We are called to stand strong against anti-Semitism and against all its hateful cousins: racism and homophobia, xenophobia and a toxic disregard for difference. We are all being suckered when we fall into the trap of becoming feuding minorities instead of common sojourners on a path to dignity and freedom for all.

The work of dismantling racism in our society and in ourselves will be long and painful, but the prophets' demands have never been easy. We are called to wrestle with the inequities which have oppressed us, and those which have benefited us. We are called to listen for the truth of a pain that our own centuries have taught us, and not just the tripwires of difference or off-putting alliances that give us an excuse to turn away. And as we have been taught in more than one Shabbat sermon by more than one member of this congregation, the first work we can do for

racial justice is right here, with the Jews of color in our own community. You will hear more on our congregation's commitment to combating racism in a powerful sermon from Rabbi Herzog Cohen on Kol Nidre. Justice.

And so one rabbi's view from this sacred peak we call Rosh Hashanah. The landscape, a compass, a horizon we call hope. The Talmud gives us *tefillat haderech*, a traveler's prayer, and insists that it be said in the plural – “May God guide *us* in peace... May God grant *us* grace and kindness.”³ And so may it be – all of us together on the journey of this new year. Not for us the static piety of the angels. *Ha-adam nikra mehalech* – the human being is called one who walks, who moves, who argues, who grows. May we go in good health, and may our loved ones and our nation know healing. May we find our hearts open in compassion and courage, that we might carry with us a Torah of justice and love. May God guide us in peace. Amen.

³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot*, 29b-30a.