

Rosh ha Shanah Sermon 2020/5781

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Shanah Tovah--

My friends,

This night is a strange night. As we are looking at each other's faces on the screen, we see some familiar faces, and we see some faces that are unfamiliar to us. Rabbi Kummer's Face and my face definitely appear larger than they have in other years—but then again, this year, you might not be seeing the people you usually eat with, give New Years' hugs to, drive to services with, or sit next to during the holiday. For many of us, these High Holidays are very different, and they may be feeling really, really hard—as we are missing friends and family (or as some of us may have had to spend way too much time with them); as we cannot support each other like we used to; as we cannot gather for a festive meal and dip our apples into honey together, wishing each other a sweet New Year.

Family, friends, support groups, communities... all those spaces that make us feel that we belong, that we are cared for, are understood, and are loved—all those spaces have had to change over the last 6 months. What does this holiday mean to us, if we cannot celebrate together with others in the ways we used to in the past?

One interesting fact about Rosh haShanah that I want to share with you is that it actually has been observed and celebrated in many different ways throughout Jewish history: In the Torah, in the Talmud, in the Middle Ages, and until today—and that joy and awe and food and fear often have come together in surprising ways.

When we read about Rosh haShanah in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses (Leviticus 23 and Numbers 29), we learn that on Rosh haShanah, all Jews would come together, listen to the majestic sounds of the Shofar, and tremble in fear of

the moral judgement rendered by God—a judgement that would be sealed ten days later, when they gathered again for Yom Kippur. Rosh haShanah is called *Yom T'ru'ah*—"the day of the shofar blasts" (Numbers)—and *Yom haZikaron*—"the day of remembering" (Leviticus).

Why did the Torah institute such a day of judgement, fear, and awe? Because it was clear that this is what the people, often failing to uphold some moral standards, needed: Often, they became arrogant, too self-assured, and not kind enough—they, too, missed the mark, sometimes—as do we, to this day. We all miss the mark sometimes.

But this is not how the festival of Rosh haShanah is observed today. In the 6th century BCE, when some Jews returned from the First, the Babylonian Exile, and begun to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, Ezra the Priest looked at his people, gathering, studying, and trembling with fear—and he said: "No. No, my people, this is not what I want you to do on this day. Go home. Go home to your families. Gather your loved ones around a table that is spread with a feast for the holiday. Celebrate. Sing. Exult in being together and in being free to celebrate as Jews! Exult because we made it back home from exile—and because we are able to be together—and because we are able to keep our own Jewish holidays and pray to our own God. Recline in joy!" (Nehemiah 8).

Why did Ezra add so much joy to a formerly very serious and solemn day? Because he understood that the task in front of the Jewish people was to rebuild an entire country, a whole culture, and a people, and he knew that this task could feel overwhelming. He knew that what his followers needed most at that moment was joy—because nothing makes you more resilient than experiencing joy and happiness.

And then, many hundreds of years later, the rabbis of the Talmud merged it all together: they included into our services the Torah readings, Shofar blowing, and the many prayers that speak about God the King, God the Judge, and God the Almighty—so that we can listen and remember and reassess who we are and how we can become the best versions of ourselves—and then they urged us to go home, sit down with our families at tables covered with special holiday food and

drinks, enjoy, and celebrate being together. The rabbis of the Talmud even came up with some foods that some Jews eat to this very day to make sure that the holiday of Rosh haShanah would be filled with joy and blessings:

- We dip our apples and our Challah in honey so that the coming year might be sweet!
- “Rosh Hashanah” literally means the “head of the year”—so some of us may eat the head of a mighty fish, in the hope that the coming year may be mighty, too!
- We may eat carrot slices, as they look like gold coins, in the hope that we may be showered with riches in the year to come!
- We may eat pomegranates, hoping that, in the year to come, we would be as fruitful—and the abundance of blessing in our lives would be as plentiful—as the seeds of a pomegranate!
- ... and there are so many other options (*Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 12a*).

Why did the rabbis come up with all those new blessings and rituals? Because they understood that in their time, when Jews lived under foreign rulers and had to cope with a great deal of uncertainty, would love the predictability and stability that only rituals can provide. As we move from prayer to prayer during our services, from Torah reading to Torah reading, and from dish to dish at our holiday table, many of us feel comforted. We remember the many years in the past when we prayed those same prayers of repentance, when we listened to those same Torah stories, gathered with family, and ate those same foods asking for blessings—and our hearts are filled with gratitude, joy, certainty, and calm.

Is all this still relevant today? Do we still need to repent, be with family, eat with gratitude, and ask for blessings for the new year? Of course, we do. We need all those things today more than ever.

We still need the reminder of the Shofar sounds and the texts of the prayers, and we still ask ourselves this question: Who have I been, during this last year? Have I been too arrogant at times? Have I been too self-assured? Have I been kind enough? We still are in need of joy and happiness, as we still face an overwhelming task while being in need of a lot of extra resilience. So, we still enjoy the food and company of our beloved ones—in person, on the screen, and waving at each other on socially distanced walks. We are still facing a frightening amount of insecurity and an entirely unknown future. We are still yearning for

predictability and safety. We still need rituals to make us feel that a holiday has arrived.

And yet, this year, even if we try our hardest to celebrate Rosh haShanah in the ways we have always done, we still feel some sadness over the many meals, rituals, and connections we will not experience this year.

And so, I want to turn with you to an even older layer of Rosh haShanah... and maybe that layer will help us to overcome a bit of our sadness. In the Book of Genesis, we read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...” and in our High Holiday services, we sing *Hayom harat olam* — “Today is the birthday of the world...” Is today the birthday of the world? Are we celebrating Creation today?

According to rabbinic tradition, we actually are not. The world, according to the rabbis, was already birthed five days before Rosh Hashanah, on the 25th of the Jewish month of Elul. The rabbis of the Talmud would say that today, on Rosh haShanah, we are actually marking Day 6 of the first week of Creation. And what happened on Day 6? We happened, we human beings—we were created. A *midrash* or “rabbinic story:”

Rabbi Eliezer taught: The world was created on the twenty-fifth of Elul... This implies that Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah. In the first hour [of that day] the idea arose [in God’s mind to create humankind]... in the ninth [hour, Adam and Eve were] commanded [not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge], in the tenth [hour, they] transgressed the commandment, in the eleventh [hour, they were] judged, and in the twelfth hour, they were pardoned by God. God said to Adam: “This will be a sign for your descendants. Just as you stood before me in judgment on this day and were pardoned, so too will your descendants stand before me to be judged on this day--and they will be pardoned” (P’sikta d’Rav Kahanah 23:1).

We human beings were created on the 6th day of the week of Creation; we learned to love throughout the night; and then, on Friday morning, we missed the mark and were expelled from the Garden of Eden—to be released into a new world, a totally different and much more difficult reality, to learn how to be the best human beings we could possibly be.

So, on the first day of Rosh haShanah, we celebrate the first moment in human history, the moment when we enter new territory, when we enter a new world, a new reality, when we encounter new tasks, new family constellations, new jobs and foods and birth pangs—and we have to ask ourselves: *How can we do this best?*

It might come as no surprise to you that this moment—the moment when we have to learn to navigate an entirely new world—that this moment is now. And that this moment has actually always been “now.” And “now.” And “now.” That all our judgements and corrections; joy, happiness, and resilience; structures, rituals, and beloved familiarities—that all those are put in place in order to help us find an answer to this eternal question: *And how can we do this best?*

Many of us are looking back at a year that was nothing like what we had expected. Many painful things have happened. Many good things have happened, too. On a personal note, I want to share with you that I began to think about this Rosh haShanah sermon last year, when I was sitting on a train back from DC to New York City. I decided back then that I wanted to speak this next year about the meaning of family and friends in our lives. Obviously, I had no idea how central this theme would become in the months that would follow. Like many of you, I have been separated from friends and family: I have not seen my mother in Germany in more than a year, and it’s been more than two years since I last saw my brother, also in Germany. And yet, somehow, this year has also been filled with its share of blessings: This year, I got to marry my husband, with family and friends gathered on zoom from eight countries—and we are now expecting our first child. While everything seems to have been put on hold this year, everything has also been changing and growing and, in some cases, blooming.

And so, this is it: A new year begins. None of us knows what this year will bring. All of us are still yearning for a bit more of the sweet familiar, the togetherness, the predictable. And yet, here we are, as human beings, facing again an unknown future, all of us asking: *How can we do this best?*

And in asking this question, I believe, we are all together. We may not have all the answers, but for sure, this year, as we look at each other’s faces on the

screens on our computers, TV's, iPads, and phones... we surely are in this together.

So I want to ask you now to take a moment to look at someone else's face, in this ZOOM gathering, and just smile at them—and in your heart, wish them a good new year.

May this coming year be a year of sweetness. A year of prosperity and growth. A year of joy, of resilience, and connection. A year of familiarity, a year of reflection. Even if we find ourselves socially distanced, may we feel emotionally connected, and may we continue to grow together. May we ask ourselves, and each other, on any given day, anew: *How can we do this best?*

And let us say, *Amen.*