

Joy, the Source of Our Strength

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5781

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On this Rosh Hashanah, I am sad. I can't help it. Today, I am in mourning. It has been an excruciatingly difficult couple of months. I never imagined that we wouldn't be together to welcome in another New Year. And now, as Rosh Hashanah began, we hear of RBG's death, it's brought me to a state of despair. How did we get here? How do we get out of this nightmare?

I feel a little bit guilty sharing these thoughts with you. However, I take solace that the New Year wasn't always a day of celebration. Take for example, a Rosh Hashanah, some 2,500 year ago. Ezra the Scribe convened the people by the water gate in Jerusalem. On top of a large wooden platform, Ezra gathered the men, women, and entire community. From dawn until midday, he taught words of Torah. As the people listened to Ezra, they began to cry and mourn.

For life was hard. Our people had been exiled to Babylonia. For generations, they were separated from their homeland and they pined to return to Israel, to return to normality.

Even after arriving home, life didn't improve. In Israel, our ancestors were harassed by locals. The walls of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple were in disrepair. Many of the returnees had adopted pagan customs and moved away from Jewish observance.

On that Rosh Hashanah, the people recognized how far they had drifted as a community and as a country. They felt powerless to make a change. And so, they did what they could: they cried and mourned the state of their world.

I know that many of you are in mourning too. Covid has ravaged our country. Almost 200,000 people dead from this virus. Many loved ones have gotten sick; others terrified that they got covid or passed it on inadvertently. Many of our children can't go to school. Our economy is shuttered, our synagogue closed, and there is no end in sight.

And it's not just covid. Our president and his enablers are making a mockery of our constitution and our democracy. We worry about the ballot box and if every vote will count. We hear about another police shooting of an unarmed black person and are reminded once again, of our country's original sin, racism. We too feel powerless to make a change. We like our ancestors, mourn the state of our world.

At the water gate, Ezra had a choice. He could have overlooked the sadness or gotten angry at the people. Instead, Ezra did not allow the people to mourn or wallow in their misery any longer.

"This day is holy to the Eternal your God. Neither mourn nor weep... Go, eat and drink things that are sweet and delicious, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since this day is holy to our Eternal One. And do not be sad, for your joy in the Eternal is the source of your strength."ⁱ

Ezra changed Rosh Hashanah to the holiday we know today. The New Year became a joyous day of food and drink and celebration. "Do not be sad, for your joy, is the source of your strength."

At this moment, we too, more than ever, need joy! And we have a lot to be joyous about. There have been so many hidden miracles during this pandemic. You've shared some of these blessings with me:

Like the blessing of slowing down and stopping literally to smell the roses. The afternoon walks with friends, time outside on our decks or balconies, gardening, and a new appreciation for nature.

It's the meals we've consumed. Those of us lucky enough to have family around can have lunches and dinners together each day. And others of us have taken up baking: challah, sourdough, and new sweet treats.

It's the miracle of zoom. We all get zoom fatigue, but being together for services, family reunions, drinks with friends, and even shiva minyans, that's a blessing.

It's time together at Bolton Street Synagogue: services, boker tov, Torah study, religious school, and our gathering remotely in celebration.

And there is a new appreciation for the nurses, doctors, and medical professionals; the firefighters, police officers and postal carriers; the teachers and babysitters; the cleaning people and the barbers. We possess much gratitude for the hard work of those who help keep our society afloat.

There is so much pain and sadness in our world. We need joy more than ever. These blessings and miracle shine a small amount of happiness on our darkened world. Joy provides us with the strength to get up each day, to repair our own lives, and provide a flicker of optimism that tomorrow will be better than today.

Ezra also believed in an optimistic vision. That Rosh Hashanah, some 2,500 years ago, became a clarion call, a rededicationⁱⁱ for a stronger community. Ezra recognized that mourning and deep attachment to the past provided a pathway to nowhere.

Ezra's joyful call was centered around Torah; a vision that we would live and breathe Torah: learn and teach Torah; gather in community to study Torah; act and follow the ethical and religious commandments of Torah.

At that moment, Ezra's vision seemed preposterous. The people had veered so far off the path, that they didn't even understand a word of Hebrew. There was no connection to Judaism or Jewish belief. Their country was in shambles, lawlessness, fighting with neighbors, and a lack of morality.

Over the course of months, years, even decades, that vision centered around Torah slowly became a reality. The kernels planted on that Rosh Hashanah grew into the Judaism that we know and love today. Teachers taught Torah and students learned; joyous celebration; the pursuit of mitzvot and acts of loving kindness became the heart of Judaism.

This was not an easy change or a quick one. There was no superman or superwoman or super person who changed society on a dime. It took diligence and patience, it took collective action, it took everyone in the community to bring this vision into reality. It was the long haul that brought us the Judaism of today.

Our holiday of Rosh Hashanah is a little bit muddled. The New Year is a day of contrasts: of sadness and celebration, of memory and sweetness, of repentance and creation. Today, we take a few moments to mourn; to be sad at all that we've lost and to cry at the state of our world.

But we must not wallow in our misery for much longer. Our mourning and sadness can only bring us so far. It is joy that is the source of our strength. We must get to work, to bring to fruition the optimistic vision, that tomorrow will be better than today. For we envision a society where democracy prevails, racism is extinguished, climate change averted, where Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's legacy is preserved. A world where covid no longer impacts every moment of every day, where our Jewish community flourishes, and where all people, no matter who we are, are treated as the children of God.

We must be in it for the long haul, for change does not come quickly or easily. It takes patience and diligence and requires each of us to step up and build the world as it should be. Believe me, we want change now; we want the quick win, the revolution. But, sustaining a revolution takes hard work and energy and time. I believe, no I am confident, that this vision will prevail, there is no doubt of it. It just needs us to make it so.

ⁱ Nehemiah 8:9-10

ⁱⁱ See the Introduction to "The Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor," commentary by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, p. xx – xxii. I'm also in gratitude to Rabbi Leon Morris for sharing his thoughts at a CCAR High Holy Day Call – July 2020