

“Are Carrots, Eggs and Coffee the Keys to Resilience?”

Sermon, Second Day Rosh HaShanah 5781

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My parents ... alyhem ha-shalom ... would sometimes say, “Nothing’s accomplished by sitting around the house all day”, and “It’s not polite to cover your mouth when you speak”. I wonder what they would say now. Sitting around the house and covering our mouths helps save the world! Another indication that 5781 finds us in the strange upside-down of CovidWorld.

Nonetheless, there is no masking the fact that today is **Rosh Hashanah**, the beginning of a New Year and **Yom Horat Olam**, the anniversary of Creation, imbued through and through with a quality captured in words of Torah ... **V’yar Elohim Ki Tov** -- “and God saw that it was **good**” -- a precious world to be protected and preserved. Today is also **Yom Truah** because shofar sounds call us to gather in sacred community, to rally for noble causes, waken to a year of new possibilities. And today is **Yom HaDin**, a Day of Judgement. We measure ourselves against the standards of decency we profess, but occasionally fail to meet. We embark on our journey of **tshuvah**, seeking to reshape ourselves and our world by righting old wrongs, setting aside grudges and destructive behaviors. Sluffing off

deception, we present ourselves openly and honestly, praying for a gentle judgement, for

acceptance, forgiveness and love, and granting same to those contrite souls who reach out to us in repentance. That's what **Rosh Hashanah** should be about. Along with haircuts and new clothes, high holy day tickets, crowds and parking problems. It should be about family and friends sitting together in the same Sanctuary seats year after year or around the same dinner tables, round challah with raisins, apples and honey. Ah ... those good old, lazy, hazy, crazy days of **Yontif**!

But this **Rosh Hashanah** is so different. Rather than all together, we are separated, relegated to ...well, sitting around the house. We make **yontif** not with our congregation but with our computer. The High Holy Day melodies sound thin because we hear no one singing with the Cantors but ourselves. The vibrancy of our clergy is flattened, now matter of pixels on a screen. A virtual Torah reading loses some majesty, even as we recognize the urgency of its message warning against one generation sacrificing another on the altar of heedless ideology. We still hear the shofar, but its immediacy and impact feels reduced by distance.

And while CovidWorld kept many at home, others hit the street, calling for

“cheshbon hanefesh” and **“tshuvah”** ... for an honest accounting of our country’s character in order to restore the soul of our democracy; to dedicate ourselves anew to truths once held to be “self-evident”; and to affirm those inalienable rights that are the endowment of all human beings -- including equal justice before the law, and at the hands of those who are entrusted to enforce that law.

Everything is so different. There is such disruption, distance and displacement in our daily lives. Much has been deferred or derailed. Who is not exhausted by it all? Disturbed by images of burning landscapes, smoldering cities and inflamed passions? Dismayed by the absence of truth, civility or empathy in our national conversation? Friends, **because** of the turmoil around us, we need this Rosh Hashanah. We need a special dose of the togetherness that our clergy, professional staff and lay leaders have been providing to us even while we have remained apart

all these months. We need the song of our Cantors to fill our hearts; our rabbis leading us in prayer to restore our souls. We need the Torah’s assurance that something good can be fashioned from chaos, and the Shofar’s call to awaken us from the social and spiritual numbness that has invaded our lives. We need our

apples and our honey – to taste sweetness and hope -- more than ever. So, here it is – Rosh Hashanah – a reliable and welcome constant in a world become unfamiliar. It comes to remind us, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, that while we may be changed by what happens to us, we can refuse to be reduced by it. Even in CovidWorld, we Jews will celebrate and declare “v’yar ki tov”. In this New Year, despite all, we will seek out and embrace the goodness we know is there.

Under all kinds of circumstances, we Jews have maintained such an outlook. Call it a stubborn hopefulness, an innate resilience. If so, ours is a resilience tested by history, tempered by experience and informed by acquired wisdom. I am reminded of a story about making jet engines resilient enough to withstand bird strikes.

European companies tested their engines using a cannon which launched waves of chickens (deceased, obviously) at the jets and so came up with a design for more resilient engines.

American companies tested the resilience of their engines the same way, acquiring a similar cannon and firing away. However, no matter how many adjustments they made, the engines always failed to survive the storm of chicken carcasses. So, they sent for a European engineer to get advice. She watched one test and then asked, “have you thought to first, thaw out the chickens?”

Elie Wiesel wrote, "I marvel at the resilience of the Jewish people. Their best characteristic is their desire to remember. No other people have such an obsession with memory." What does memory have to do with resilience? Our collective memory often focuses on our people's tragedies and losses. In his writing, Wiesel suggests that our resilience is rooted in just the opposite: not in recollections of

loss or tragedy, but in remembering the fact and the significance of survival. The many times we coped, we endured, we learned, we adapted and we carried on.

And what is true for a people, can be true for an individual. Wiesel encourages us to take as our own the motto of the Jewish partisans, **Mir Zinen Doh**, "we are here". We Jews are survivalists. Not by digging bunkers or fleeing into the wilderness, but by doggedly remaining engaged with the world, seeking the good, striving to make things better for ourselves and others. We take the hard stuff, and in our way, soften its impact. So that our engines -- our values, our vision, our strength and our spirit -- all that moves us as a people and motivates us as individuals will prove resilient, no matter what's thrown at us.

Wiesel's teaching leads me to reconsider and re-interpret a key passage in our High

Holy Day liturgy, the **Uneh Taneh Tokef**. We tend to focus on the "fatalism" of the text. Who will live, who will die? Who will succumb by fire, water, sword, famine or plague? It is written and it is sealed. When this prayer was composed, these were real concerns. Our ancestors' lives were far more precarious than ours. I cannot imagine they found much solace recounting all their vulnerabilities. What I can imagine is that they found courage, reassurance and strength by recalling how many of these challenges and ordeals they survived! How they endured, adapted, persevered in the face of real threats – physical and spiritual. Read this way, Uneh Taneh Tokef is not a liturgy of existential resignation, but a prayer of resilience or of proud defiance, or maybe, of resistance.

Given this perspective, **Uneh Taneh Tokef** suggests three things that can help soften life's hard and difficult circumstances, enabling us to cultivate our own resilience. **Tshuvah**, genuine openness to personal growth and change. **Tephila**, a spirit connected to that which is larger than self and charged with gratitude for the good in our lives. And **Tsedakah**, a heart large enough to care for others even when we are struggling ourselves. **Tshuvah, Tephila and Tsedakah ...** or as I like to say --

carrots, eggs and coffee.

What happens when we toss a carrot, an egg or some coffee beans into boiling water. The carrot, stiff, rigid, so easy to snap becomes flexible. The egg, fragile on the outside and squishy within, sheds its fragile shell and become firm, squeeze it and it bounces back. The coffee beans, hardly change, but they give off and share a wonderful aroma and, more important, they change the water. If you don't mind me mixing my metaphors think of it this way: **Tshuvah**, enables us to be less rigid and less defensive, less likely to snap, to be more flexible, more responsive to our own needs and to the needs of others. **Tephila** asks us to crack the shell of our cynicism, to give substance to our inner lives, and firm up our spirits so we can bounce back from disappointments or difficulties. And **Tsedakah** urges us to jump in and help to change the situation for the better by sharing whatever we can give. This is a recipe for resilience wherever and whenever we find ourselves in "hot water". Be flexible, shed your shell to find your inner strength, give of yourself and, together with others, help change the situation for the better.

Albert Einstein once opined, "There comes a point in your life when you need to stop reading other people's books and write your own". Rosh Hashanah is our

time. This is the season of “books”. **Sefer HaChayim** -- the Book of Life in which we hope to be inscribed, knowing that much of life is beyond our control or our ability to anticipate. And in the **Une Taneh Tokef, Sefer HaZichronot** -- the Book of Remembrances -- of which it says , “**v’chotaim yad kol adam bo**”, therein “every human hand leaves its mark”. Suggesting a keen insight: The memories we choose to retain shape the lives we live.

If we fill these metaphorical books with memories only of movies missed, the trips postponed, the restaurant meals uneaten, the celebrations that were cancelled or the families gatherings -- for joy or for sorrow -- which were impossible to arrange, and all the hugs we must forego, then we miss out on what Wiesel identifies as the role of memory in cultivating the resilience we all need these days. I suggest that each of us use our capacity for memory to recall all the times we have endured, made do, survived, coped, re-configured, re-wired or rose above circumstances that threatened to bring us down, diminish us or overwhelm us. Let us also remember the kindness, accomplishment, joy, success, comfort or relief that came our way as well, often unbidden and unanticipated. Then we can write our own Books of Life and Remembrance. Fill them with the insight and understanding we

have acquired, the confidence we have gained, new skills learned... thank you, Zoom ... the personal and communal strengths we have developed. With memories like these we can add to our reservoir of resilience so that we can not only bounce back but move forward.

That brings me to the donkey who fell into a well. The animal was old and the well dry, so the farmer decided to close the well and bury the donkey. With his field hands, he began to shovel. The donkey cried. Then went silent.

The farmer finally looked down into the well. He was astonished. With each shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey shook it off and stepped up.

They continued to shovel dirt. The animal continued to shake it off and step up on the pile. Soon, everyone was amazed as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well gave a hee-haw ... which is Donkey for you know what (!) ... and trotted off.

A lot has been shoveled on **our** backs during the past year. Let's use this Rosh Hashanah to shake it off as best we can, step up, and with a hee-haw to who or

what made it harder than it needed to be ... and with profound appreciation to those who made it better than expected ... leave it behind, trot off with our carrots, eggs and coffee ... to seek the good, and live.

Shanah Tova.

Benediction:

The Lubavitch Rebbe Taught: If you see when needs to be repaired and know how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete (the work of creation). But if you only see what is wrong and what is ugly in the world, then it is you yourself that needs repair.

On this Rosh Hashanah, when so much seems ugly and nasty, help us, God, to be resilient and whole-hearted enough to see within in the darkness, light; within the brokenness an opportunity to make things whole. To complete the work of Creation a your partners, so we, and all humanity, can declare with You, “V’yar Elohim v’ Kol Yashvey Tavel”, That God and all Humanity looked upon the world,

“V’yar Ki Tov” ... and saw that it was very good. For now, for always and for all.

Shannah Tova.