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Rosh Hashanah Sermon  
5778

Shanah Tovah everyone.

What strange times we live in.

We have record-breaking hurricanes barrelling down on us. We have demonstrations in the streets by neo-Nazis. We have immigrants who were brought to this country when they were children who don’t whether they are going to be able to stay. We have seen better days.

And yet we’ve also seen worse. We as Jews, along with our friends and family, have a rich, complex history. We have encountered adversity at most every turn, often responding relentlessly, with determination, ingenuity, and boldness.

I’d like to ruminate on those times for a moment.

In the year 70 CE, the Temple was destroyed. We know this. The Temple was the primary site, and the fire offerings brought there were the primary means, of drawing close to Hashem, to our God. The very word for offerings – Korbanot – means to draw close. For a people whose very security felt dependent upon a notion that Hashem dwelled among us, losing the site that allowed us to feel that presence could have sent us spiraling into a sense of existential despair. And maybe for some of us it did.

And yet, out of that chaos arose the remarkable form of Judaism that we continue to practice to this day. A Judaism based around prayer, good works, Torah study and rituals in the home and in the synagogue, rather than sacrificial offerings brought to the Temple.

Rabbi Natan tells a story that illustrates this change:
Yochanan ben Zakkai, the story goes, the great sage of his generation when the Temple was destroyed, was coming forth from Jerusalem. Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. “Woe unto us!” Rabbi Joshua cried, “that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!”

“My son,” Rabbi Yochanan said to him, “be not grieved; we have another atonement as effective as this.” “And what is it?” asked Rabbi Joshuah. “It is g’milut hasadim, acts of loving-kindness,” Rabbi Yochanan responded, and he went on to quote God’s statement in the book of Hosea when God says “For I desire goodness and not sacrifice.”

The Jews of this ancient generation responded to one of the deepest shocks their community had ever absorbed with ingenuity, creativity and daring in order to sustain the edifice of Judaism, of Torah, that had given them so much life and spiritual sustenance up until that point.

And they did so in a way that emphasized the degree of continuity with their heritage. Rather than suggest that their teachings were breaking entirely from their roots, they explained that their teachings emphasizing prayer and good works at the expense of sacrifice arose from the same source as their heritage.

*Two* Torahs were given at Mt. Sinai, they explained. A written one – containing Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which we read each week in Shul; and an *oral* one, later codified in the Talmud, which consisted of the teachings these new sages were espousing. They grounded what seemed to be their innovations in the source of their people’s tradition, telling a story that all the teachings came from the same place.

Flash forward a thousand years. Another example. 13th century Spain. This is before the Inquisition. Jews are mostly peacefully coexisting with their Muslim neighbors. But
rather than a physical crisis, Jews are, some would argue, facing a spiritual one. The Jewish religion, to some of its adherents, felt staid, weighed down by legalism and sterile philosophy, dried up of its richness and imaginativeness. So a Jewish scholar (or group of scholars, depending on whom you ask) put pen to paper, formulating what was to become a new entry into our sacred canon, a mystical imagining of the inner life of Hashem, of God. It could be seen as a roadmap for how to effect a union between human beings and the divine, which had been ruptured.

“At the head of the potency of the King,” the book began, in a creative reimagining of the Genesis story, “He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of Infinity – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all.” Thus spawned the Zohar, a foundational text of Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical movement, versions of which have warmed the hearts and inspired the souls of Jews and persons of other backgrounds for centuries now, created in a moment of need.

Once again, the new link in the chain of tradition did not completely break off from the past. Those who initially distributed the Zohar told the story that it was an ancient text that they discovered. Evidence for this was that it was written not only in Hebrew but in Aramaic, a language that had not been spoken for centuries. Further, the stories of the Zohar are based around a rabbi, Shimon Bar Yochai, who had lived in the land of Israel centuries before, shortly after the Temple was destroyed. Imaginativeness and creativity were once again couched in the idiom of our forefathers.

One more example. Now we are in 19th-Century France. Anti-Semitism has reached a boiling point. Alfred Dreyfuss, Jewish French Army captain, is convicted of treason over
false claims that he has spied for the Germans. This is in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, when we felt sure that days of blatant prejudice were behind us. Shocked out of our stupor, an Austro-Hungarian journalist named Theodor Herzl began, deliberately and painstakingly, to launch a movement now called Zionism, seeking safe harbor for Jews the world over, eventually culminating, of course, in the formation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948.

Here, the continuity with our roots is explicit. Our liturgy has long called for a return to Israel. “Raise high the banner to gather our exiles” we say, in the weekday Amidah. “May you rebuild Jerusalem rapidly in our days,” we say, a couple paragraphs later. And of course, “Next year in Jerusalem!” we say at the end of every Passover Seder, as we have for centuries. And yet there is no missing the boldness in his project. There was no waiting for the Mashiah to come. There was a determination that matters needed to be taken into our own hands.

So in each generation, we have responded to moments of anxiety, to moments of difficulty, to moments of adversity, in at least two successful ways. First, we have not abandoned Judaism, we have engaged with it. We have turned to it as a wellspring of support, to nourish our parched souls, to take comfort under the sheltering structures our ancestors have provided.

And second, we have not looked upon our tradition like an artifact in a museum, cherishing it from a distance but leaving it untouched and unmolded. We have grappled with it, radically at times, breathing life into it to serve our most urgent needs.

It has long been understood that Torah is an Etz Hayim, a tree of life, constantly growing, its long branches arching into new territory that needs its life and protection.
I confess, I wouldn't believe so heavily in the power of these two elements – of turning to Judaism for life-sustaining nourishment and of wrestling with it in order to find new meaning – if I hadn't experienced it so profoundly myself. I wouldn't be preaching the gospel of reengaging with Judaism during moments of crisis as a means of infusing our lives with holiness and overcoming adversity if I hadn't been a primary beneficiary of its richness.

But I have.

As many of you know, I was introduced to Judaism as a central operating force in my life from the day I was born. My father was a rabbi. He was on a Jewish, spiritual quest my entire life and probably his as well. People regale me with stories of how, mid-conversation, he would turn to them and ask for their take on the secret to the universe. This level of intensity was a hallmark of his approach to life.

And the stories of Torah I learned in my youth took on valences of comparable gravity. When God told Abraham, “lekh lekha,” go for yourself and journey to the place that I will show you, it wasn't just a quaint story that marked the beginning of our people's distinctive journey; it was a message that God communicates with us, and if we incline our hearts just right, and pay attention, we can hear that voice and we can be directed.

The story of the akedah, of the binding of Isaac, wasn't a bizarre story where a father seems ready to kill his only child, it was a crucible; a true test of whether we understood what uniting ourselves to God’s essence really meant. So our tradition took on great importance for me, even while I was just a kid who was bummed he couldn't watch TV on Shabbat.
My mother was no less devoted to a Jewish lifestyle than my father, even though (or perhaps especially because?) she converted to Judaism in her 30s. She took classes at Gratz College, cooked every shabbat, and generally infused the home with faith and love, as so many women have done over centuries.

And they sent me to, what at the time was called Solomon Schechter Day School out in Elkins Park, where we spent significant portions of each day learning Hebrew and studying our Jewish tradition. I still remember the activity in which we were to act out a trial, based on the dispute between Jacob and Esau, with some students taking on roles of witnesses, litigants, and jurors. I still haven’t gotten over my classmates’ failure to recognize the merits of my arguments as counsel for Esau that he was truly the aggrieved party.

I remember our Passover Seders at home, where we meticulously laid out the seder plate, matching each little cup with its special place on the plate; the ten plagues, intricately painted on the plate’s edges. I remember Shabbat services at our traditional minyan in the basement of Germantown Jewish Centre, my escaping to play football on the front lawn before returning to help lead the congregation in the hymn, Anim Z’mirot, as was the custom for children to do. Judaism infused every corner of my life.

And then it happened. One day on my father’s commute from our home in Mt. Airy to his job in Manhattan at Mazon, a nonprofit organization championing a Jewish response to hunger, he collapsed. He was at the SEPTA station in North Philadelphia, and he tumbled down a flight of stairs, suffering from an apparent heart attack.
This was four months removed from his graduation from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and one month after the birth of his his youngest child, my sister Henya. He was 35. I, I hesitate to note, am 34.

I was seven years old at the time. My middle sister Sophie was three. My mother Cynthia was all of a sudden a single mother of three at age 38. I have written these words so many times and, as you can imagine, they never lose their power for me.

Judaism as a nurturing force in our lives did not go away at this moment. If anything, it strengthened. The Jewish community I was raised in stepped up big time. Betsy Teutsch, the wife of my father’s teacher David, and the mother of one of my childhood friends, was there to embrace me with open arms the moment I arrived home from school that fateful day. During that week of shivah, hardly a minute went by when there were not dozens of people in our home, supporting our every move.

My entire Solomon Schechter class took a class trip to visit me at home that week. I still have handwritten notes from every one of them, as well as copies of the letters that poured in from my father’s family, friends and colleagues. These writings help inform my memories of him. A eulogy from his mentor and teacher Rabbi Art Green, another from his best friend Rabbi Michael Cohen, a letter from our neighbor when we lived in Jerusalem, author Yossi Klein Halevi, and another from congressman Henry Waxman, representative of a nearby district to where his parents lived. Support abounded.

But as the flocks of people receded, it was clear that a crater remained where our home had been.

Still, Jewishness endured as a source of strength for our family. I remember the copy of Maurice Lamm’s book *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, on my mother’s
nightstand, its purple and black shadows on the cover ominously signaling its contents, the words “death is a night in between two days” summarizing its theology.

My mother soon remarried. I kept going to Solomon Schechter for a few years, before ultimately transferring to Masterman, day school education being too expensive for our family living on a relatively modest life insurance policy.

Still, Jewish tradition remained a constant in our life. Shabbat dinner remained a staple in our home, even while some of the strictures that had accompanied it – no television, no driving – during my father’s lifetime faded away. Our family unity was, I can now see, reinforced by this practice.

But rocky roads remained ahead, the reverberations of this loss still being felt. My mother’s marriage broke down, and we moved west to be near her family of origin in Eugene, Oregon when I was 14.

As you might imagine, the Jewish population of this college town was a bit less substantial than that in Philadelphia, but my mom quickly had me set up studying with another student and an Orthodox rabbi in town, and I soon taught Hebrew school classes at the local synagogue.

But there is one thing even a strong-willed, well-intentioned mother is no match for: adolescence. Little could keep my attention by this point. Not school, not extracurriculars, certainly not Judaism. If it wasn’t related to dating or sports, I probably wasn’t interested.

And frankly, it wasn’t simply run-of-the mill adolescence my mother and my tradition were up against. Looking back, I can see now that by this point I was gripped by a sense of steady, persistent anxiety. There is no other way to describe it. I was always
worried, and if I wasn’t for a split second worried, I was worried about what I should be worried about.

I didn’t recognize this as anything unusual because I assumed the high level of persistent worry I was experiencing was inherent to the human condition. I could not remember ever feeling differently. Everyone must be this way, I assumed. In Paul Thomas Anderson’s film *Punch Drunk Love*, Adam Sandler’s character reaches out to his sister’s husband, a dentist, because this dentist is the only medical professional Sandler knows, and he is hoping for some psychological help. “What exactly is wrong,” his brother-in-law, the dentist, asks. “I don’t know if there is anything wrong,” Sandler replies, “because I don’t know how other people are.” This encapsulated my experience. I found myself constantly worried about what was creeping around the corner, what was preparing to knock me off my feet, and all the while I was sure that everyone else was going through the exact same thing.

But while I had no outward interest in Judaism by this point – I had quit teaching Hebrew School classes, quit independent Torah study, and was spending as many Friday nights as I could not home for shabbat; instead, out with my friends – while I had no conscious interest in Judaism by this point, the seeds of my faith had long since been planted and were bearing fruit.

I say faith hesitantly but intentionally. Faith is not a word we moderns usually use to describe Judaism. Faith is really a word we often associate with Christianity or other traditions. We are, instead a people, a tradition, a culture.

This is all true, but for me, the emphasis was different. The traditional Judaism I was raised with, particularly influenced by my father’s preference for and interest in the
mystical, has the possibility of giving you a strong sense that you are not alone. That God is by your side.

From the personal relationships that our ancestors like Abraham and Moses had with God, to the way our liturgy is structured – words like Barukh *Atah* Adonai – Bless *You* God – *you* with whom who I have a personal relationship – to more explicit references to Hashem’s emunah, to God’s faith in His people, the building blocks for the sense that God is with us, Immanu-El, are embedded into Judaism more than many of us realize.

So even while I had abandoned rigorous engagement with Judaism... its lessons, and what I would now say its gifts, were intrinsically a part of my worldview. Even while my anxiety remained pronounced, and even dipped into bouts of depression I think, I don’t think I ever reached complete despair. My sense that I had a co-pilot, a conversation partner, a thought partner in Whoever or Whatever was out there; that my thoughts were searchable, that my fears and worries could be seen; that there was a calming presence who could hear what was on my mind, sustained me during this period.

This is not to say that it was a smooth road from there on out. It was always, and has always been, two steps forward, one step back.

My college years began essentially as an extension of my adolescent ones. I self-medicated with the most available drug in the Pacific Northwest. Beer. Anxiety continued to be a persistent force in my life, even though I remained unaware of the extent to which it had a hold over me.

At a certain point, however, I hit a breaking point. I don’t remember any particular moment of epiphany, like Moses encountering the Burning Bush, but I do remember when I
had reached a low point, deciding that I wasn’t making enough of myself. That I was letting myself and my potential, whatever it was, go to waste.

Like the sports figures I idolized growing up who shovel snow off the basketball court when they are kids, just to get in a few more repetitions, I decided I needed to at least apply myself at school, since that was the project I was involved with at the time.

Soon this application expanded to include a redoubled commitment to Judaism.

I started davenning multiple times per day, I started studying Torah, and I started keeping kosher. These were the structures I knew, available to me both out of a sense of compulsion – my father had felt commanded to observe these customs, so I felt compelled to observe them as well – and out of a sense of opportunity: these were portals to other worlds. These traditions were means of accessing the mystery that illuminated all of life. That could arouse our spirits to possibility.

And in some ways, this re-exploration paid significant dividends for me. The prayer book, the siddur, in particular, began to operate as an elixir, at least temporarily, for my worried soul. Each morning I would rush through the pages and pages of required liturgy, and certain islands of phrases amongst the sea of words would leap off the page, resonating deeply. Psalm 91, which we read each morning as part of P’sukei D’z’mirah, the warm up verses of praise, provides a good example.

O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai – 2 I say of Adonai, [God is] my refuge and stronghold, my God in whom I trust.

I felt both in need of God’s protection and reassured that it was beckoning to me.
The shabbat morning Amidah. Sabenu mi’tuvkha v’samhenu bi’shuatekh. Allow us to take pleasure in your goodness and to experience joy in your salvation. I felt deserving of harsh judgment at the time. A sense that God wanted me to experience joy to experience goodness helped buoy me.

Or words that gave me a sense of purpose, like Rebbe Nachman’s Prayer for Peace. “Let all who dwell on earth simply acknowledge the truth of truths: that we have not come into this world for the sake of quarreling and war, nor for the sake of hatred, jealousy, anger, or bloodshed; rather, we have come into this world only to know You [God] – may You be blessed eternally!”

For someone coping with a steady dose of worry, always concerned what shoe was about to drop, what threat was right around the corner, these moments of prayer each morning had a steadying effect. They could keep me focused on the yearning to be close to Hashem. They gave me a sense that there was someone reassuring me of my fundamental goodness. That I deserved to be happy, short as it was that I was able to hang on to that truth.

Prayer had another benefit as well, divorced from any particular contents of the liturgy. As my teacher Jacob Staub writes, “hasidic rebbes teach that when distractions arise during prayer, one should pray with one’s distractions rather than shooing them away... The thoughts that arise out of left field, however unpleasant or unwelcome,” he writes, “often come from places buried deep within us, almost as if they are a gift from God, an invitation to look directly at them.

It is as if they are a reward for getting our minds to settle down sufficiently in prayer, thus having allowed them to emerge from the shadows.”
So not only did prayer allow me to feel like I was not alone; it allowed me to untangle the swirling thoughts attaching themselves to every corner of me, burrowing in and weighing me down. It allowed me to bring them to the surface more. To show them to God, to inspect them, and ultimately to let them go.

I understand that not everyone relates to prayer or God in this way. Nor am I making the case that if we would only pray hard enough, we would stave off physical harm or economic insecurity. We know too many innocent people who have been harmed by too many whims of the universe – too many natural disasters, too many menacing forces, too many strokes of bad luck – to believe in a God who picks winners and losers.

What I do believe is that we can allow a sense of God’s presence to wash over us, to allow us to experience calm. That we can perhaps open a portal to the divine, tuning into that divine hum reverberating out of the center of the universe. That we can bring some peace within ourselves, can bring some harmony to the cacophonous voices dialoguing within and around us.

So I believe deeply in the notion that buried within Judaism is a treasure trove of spiritual, cultural and communal resources, gifted to us by our ancestors as a means of coping with the most troublesome of times, both in our interior and exterior lives.

But I also believe my father when he wrote that “We can afford neither the arrogance to reject our tradition, nor the desperate fear which causes some to kiss its feet.”

Just as there are ways that reengaging with my father’s Judaism, and the Judaism that came before all of us, brought me comfort, reassurance, and direction, there are ways that I have ultimately had to shift direction, emphasize different elements of the tradition, respond to different challenges.
This always needed to be so. Just as the previous generation’s Judaism responded to one challenge, ours responds to another, and the response will inevitably look different, the emphases shifting.

My father, for instance, at least as described by my mother, did not experience the same traumas I did. He had his own demons, to be sure, his own struggles. But he didn’t experience the world the same way I do, which, when I am not getting help, can be one of caution, hesitation and suspicion. She says he experienced life in a more carefree way than I do, that he carried a joy and a disregard for people’s opinions of him that I don’t readily have access to. I take no offense to this. Our experiences were different.

For him, then, Judaism was in some ways about bounding his unbridled impulses, rather than bouying him. He always considered himself as exhibiting insufficient self-control and self-discipline (even though others didn’t necessarily see him this way). He found his spiritual salvation, if I may call it that, in law, in Halakhah, in ritual Jewish practice. In the opportunity to channel all his actions toward a higher calling.

As he once wrote, “I feel commanded to keep the Halakhah. Yes, it is ultimately a choice,” he suggested, continuing, “I am a 20th Century westerner. But sometimes that feels like the choice to take my fingers out of my ears and hear the music that is playing. Sure I could stop them up again, but who would want to?”

For him, as I understand him, the outlet of having Halakhah to engage with, strict application of Jewish religious law, allowed him to feel as though he was living up to his fullest self, something he, and most of us, aspired to.

The emphases in my own Jewish journey have been different. I loved learning about modern scholarship and biblical criticism, for instance, the teaching that a multiplicity of
different voices over different time periods have gone into creating our sacred texts, a perspective that interested him, from what I understand, not at all.

Whereas he found salvation, if you can call it that, in law, I experience it far more intimately in the voices in our tradition that express anguish, and that note their connection to Hashem in helping them douse those fires. In King David’s psalms, for example, like Psalm 6, where he says: “Have mercy on me, Adonai, for I languish; while You, Adonai, how long! Adonai, turn! Rescue me! Deliver me as befits Your faithfulness. I am weary with groaning; Adonai heeds my plea, Adonai accepts my prayer.” Expressions of fear, yearning for a sense of comfort.

So, too, the teachings of the 18th Century Rebbe Nachman of Braslov, who suggested that the most fundamentally important part of religious life was what he called hitboddedut, or seclusion, which essentially involves, as Rabbi Green describes it, an inner aloneness with Hashem and the purely personal pouring out of the heart before Him. For this Rabbi who often experienced a deep melancholy, intimate conversation with God was a saving grace. This has resonated with me as well.

My father used to say of my mother that he envied her faith. While he used to love to struggle in the complexity of the question, he used to envy her ability to find peace in an answer. As a fellow chronic worrier, she finds solace in the words of our tradition – Adonai Li v’lo eerah. The last words of the Adon Olam. God is with me; I shall not fear.

As we turn to encounter the challenges of this particular historical moment, potentially feeling besieged from both without and within, we have two principles, I believe, to help sustain us: Judaism, Jewish tradition, gives us access to an infinitely powerful source of spiritual support. Its teachings, its words of prayer, its engagement with
the divine, all provide us pathways to an enduring life-force we can intrinsically depend upon. And second, we will face new challenges, new worlds, that will require us to apply that Jewish life force in ways our ancestors could never have imagined, in shapes and permutations they could never have foreseen. This is all Torah. The tree of life. As they say in the Talmud, Tze Ul’mad, Go forth and learn.

Shanah Tovah.