

Rabbi Spike Anderson/Temple Emanu-El/Rosh HaShannah 5778

Shmah Yisrael Adaonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

You are part of the Jewish story that goes back millennia, and our story continues to shape the world in a most profound way. You are neither the beginning of that story, nor the end, but a vital link in a chain.

Who you are, and what you will stand for, has been shaped by so many others. Just as what you do, and what you stand for, can shape those around you for generations to come.

Rosh HaShannah gives us mixed, seemingly contradictory, messages.

One is of celebration for all that makes life good, all that makes life worth living. We are here. We are together. Life can be sweet as honey on an apple. There is so much to celebrate, to be proud of, and to dream.

But at the same time, we hear the shofar blast, a wake-up call to us that our landscape is changing.

For some, the personal challenges that face us are filled with uncertainty: paying the bills, keeping your marriage together, helping your child keep her head above water, fighting a serious illness, struggling with the health of a beloved, or perhaps reeling from a death. Each morning you gird yourself, as if going into battle, against the reality of the day and against a force that we call 'despair'.

Add to this, the tides of time that wait for no one and seem fraught with bad news.

1 in 5 children in America goes to bed hungry every night.

Our political system is as dysfunctional as our country is divided. Our leadership is, at best, ineffective.

Sable rattling and war have become the rhythm of the daily news, with extremism threatening to spread violence like wildfire.

Prejudice, Anti-Semitism and Hate no longer hide under the rock of taboo, but now stride towards common acceptability.

And almost every week brings an off-the-chart flood, hurricane, drought, forest fire, or 'storm of the century'; while scientists make clear that such events will continue to spiral out of control unless we address global climate change.

For us all, the challenges that we face as a people are so complex, so colossal, that they can seem impossible.ⁱ

Yet our daily demands of work, family and school require so much of our attention that it is hard for us to engage such potentially overwhelming realities. Merely thinking about them can bring on a wave of despair.

“And no one is immune; not your rabbis, not your doctors, not those who dedicate themselves to important work; who nonetheless seriously question whether their actions still matter, whether it is worthwhile to keep making the effort.”ⁱⁱ

As a rabbi I often hear people utter the words, “I feel so helpless. I am only me, and the problem is so big. I want to do something, but I don’t even know where to begin. I feel paralyzed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But know this, every ounce of Judaism reinforces that we Jews are forbidden, forbidden, to despair.

Perkei Avot^{iv} reminds us that “although it is not your responsibility to finish the work of fixing the world, neither are you are free to desist from it.”

Judaism relies on hope and courage, for those two things counter avoidance and paralysis.

Story after story in our tradition, and even from this past year in our synagogue, challenge the concept of ‘impossible.’

And when we lift up our eyes and our voices, calling out into the void, “is anybody out there?’ We hear back from 4,000 years of Jewish generations, ‘Heneni! I am here! We are with you.’

Like echoes they converge into a real voice: here, now, today; that of your spouse, the voice of your neighbor, the call from the stranger sitting in front of you. “Heneni! I am here too.’ We are not alone.

Together we will face these challenges.

Together we will prevail.

The important lesson to learn is that isolation, whether physical or psychological, starves the human spirit, as opposed to connection which feeds and heals it.”^v That is what we are doing right now at Temple Emanu-El, as are Jews across the world.

Our Jewish tradition is full of imperfect people who become our spiritual heroes because they are able to overcome their fears, their tragedies, and the impossibilities of their own time.

From Jacob who wrestled with the angel in the darkest of night^{vi} as his family faced annihilation with the rising sun, a struggle necessary for him to realize that he did have a strength of character he did not know he possessed. Jacob emerged, battered, as Yis-ra-el the God-wrestler, able to stare into the abyss of the unknown yet charged to speak truth to power. We Jews are his descendants.

To Joseph thrown into the pit of slavery, forced to confront everything that he thought that he knew, to emerge only after years of persistence, integrity and grit. We Jews are his descendants.

To Nachson who realized that time was against his people^{vii}. To do nothing was a choice with very real consequences, and so he stepped into the Red Sea flanked by a nation of slaves, and changed the world forever. We Jews are his descendants.

When I contemplate who is Spike Anderson, where I want my rabbinate to go, and what I believe Temple Emanu-El can be, it becomes very clear. The point is not to have a synagogue that is robust, popular, and healthy. These things are vital, but they are not the point.

We need to be a place that is full of people who want to take the world from what it is, and move it, nudge it, force it if we have to, into the world that we want it to be.

Not just the world that we want for our children and our grandchildren... but for us.

We want to be a congregation that has a sense of urgency, full of congregants empowered to make the change... empowered to 'be the change'.

Tikkun Olom through *Tikkun HaNefesh*- changing the world by transforming into our best, most true selves.

But we can't wait until the time is right, or for some epiphany to strike. We can't wait until our kids graduate, or we get in shape, or when the stars are aligned. We can't wait for that big moment to present itself for us to act... for that moment may never come.

Acting against despair comes with a decision that you will do something, then practice it on a regular basis. The key is to be persistent and consistent.

I want to share with you a few stories. They are about imperfect people, like you and me. Regular people – not mythical heroes, who manage to take steps with hope and courage in the face of despair. Often their steps are reluctant, unsteady, and unsure. But they took a step. And then another.

These stories deeply inspire me. For courage is contagious.

Let's start with the story of Lisa^{viii} who, in the 1960's, was a mother with small children living outside of Washington, DC. For 5 months, every Sunday, she took her kids to a weekly vigil in front of the White House to protest nuclear testing.

For many, nuclear testing was a forgone conclusion, but for Lisa it was a doorway to extinction.

She felt like she had to do something. And so she showed up. Again and again.

These were tiny demonstrations, sometimes with only a dozen women, protesting through days of rain and snow. Pathetic really, or so it seemed to them even at the time. Their placards soggy, their slogans running ink, shivering in the cold. They attracted no news. They received no attention. And, by and large, they judged their efforts as failure.

But one of the people who saw them every Sunday was Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose book on child care had made him the most famous doctor in America at that time.

A few years later, Dr. Spock became a prominent spokesman against nuclear proliferation.

His involvement in that movement clearly influenced the mores and policy of our nation.

When asked what had moved him to step-up so vocally, he spoke about a group of women protesters whom he had driven past many a Sunday, no matter the weather.

This was Lisa's demonstration.

And seeing those women demonstrating made Benjamin Spock pause. It made him question. It made him think... and ultimately, it caused him to act ...and in doing so, to influence the course of the world.

Take the story of Rosa Parks, just two hours from here in Montgomery, AL.

The myth of her deed is that one day Rosa Parks stepped onto a bus after a long day of work, and decided, spontaneously, that she had had enough and would not give up her seat to a white patron, as was the law under Jim Crow.

The myth about Rosa Parks^{ix} is that she single-handedly and without preparation inaugurated the Civil Rights movement, which changed the course of America forever.

The myth about Rosa Parks is that she came out of nowhere to take a dramatic stand.

This portrayal implies that we act with the greatest impact when we act alone. And that change occurs instantly. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The danger of this type of myth is that it "reinforces the notion that anyone who takes a committed public stand has to be bigger than life, someone with more time, energy, courage, vision or knowledge than any normal person could possess."^x Meaning, more than you, more than me...and thus, change is beyond anyone here. This is a lie.

The truth is that Rosa Parks had been a civil rights activist for 12 years, she was involved with the local NAACP chapter, and she acted not alone, but in concert with many others.

She was brought to her first meeting by her husband, Raymond, and she was influenced by myriads of unsung heroes who stuffed envelopes, made phone calls, showed up even when it was inconvenient, demonstrated, went to jail, and faced beatings.

We will never know the names of the vast, vast majority of these people, but their efforts, sometimes humble and frustrating, pushed back against despair.

Not alone, together.

Good people of every color, from rich families and poor, from farms and from cities. They sought out others like them, and they found hope in one another despite being intimidated, spat on, and abused.

“It took a lot of faith for those early civil rights activists to endure the hatred and violence of the system. It also required a change in the moral climate and the values of the nation to end that system.

People had to really believe such things could be done before they were possible.”^{xi}

As Theodor Hertzl famously said about the resurrection of the State of Israel, “*Im Tirzu, Ayn Lo Aggadah*-If you will it, it is no dream.”

The last story that I’m going to tell you is that of Sally Mundell, and her chronicle is one that is close to Temple Emanu-El, for she is one of our own. She is here with us today, and her story is still unfolding. (I have to pause for a moment with the disclaimer that I know that my words fall short, but I am inspired by Sally, and humbled with gratitude, that we are part of her story, and her story is now part of us.)

In 2013, Sally’s husband, Grover, was diagnosed with an accelerated version of Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis.

Up until then, Grover and Sally, with their two small daughters, were living the life that they wanted, wonderfully typical, with busy careers, crazy mornings getting the kids off to school, and generally doing well.

And then Grover got sick.

They checked him into a hospital.

The doctors ran every test under the sun.

They left no stone unturned...but IPF is untreatable.

In her book titled *Packaging Good: The Healing Therapy of Giving*^{xii}, -

Sally writes about those final weeks in the hospital, of the joy that Grover insisted be infused into their limited time, of mourning the life they would not live together, and his dying wish to help people who were vulnerable, people who were sick, and people who were alone.

“Sally, promise me you’ll start a foundation. We need to do more. We need to give back. Please don’t wait.”

Most of us can not even imagine the pain that she and her family went through. Sally is clear in her book that after Grover died, life was really tough. Despite mourning her husband, caring for the wellbeing of her girls who had just lost their dad, earning a living, and trying to heal ...Sally realized that as hard as things were, now was the right time to begin. She could not wait until everything was right, and in order.

Perhaps Sally's pain & vulnerability allowed her to connect with others who were suffering.

From homeless vets, to victims of floods and hurricanes, from scared people staring at hospital walls, to active American & Israeli soldiers facing fears of an unknown tomorrow.

Sally began talking with friends, who spoke with friends, who were tired of feeling helpless. They wanted to do something to move the world, and themselves, in the right direction.

Sally cried out "Heneni, I am here!" And from all around her, her words were echoed back, "Henenu! We are with you." The Packaged Good, Sally's non-profit in Dunwoody opened 14 months ago.

Since then, they have had 8,000 people, including many children as young as her daughters, prepare 20,000 packages to be given to the hungry, the weary, and those in desperate need of connection and hope.

"Courage is what love looks like when tested by the simple, everyday necessities of being alive."^{xiii}

Ultimately, we choose what we want to believe. I choose to believe in hope. Not as a symptom of naiveté, but rather as the best tool we have against despair. Hope is a way of looking at the world, it is an orientation of the heart. Having the courage to act on our hope is the best way that I know to live with conviction. It's the only way that I know how to be authentic to who I truly want to be. Living with hope is a virtue in itself, regardless of the outcome.

As we come together on this Rosh HaShannah day in prayer, I'm reminded of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's premise that we can move the immovable, we can move God with prayer, but that our prayer is not enough.^{xiv} God needs us to do the work, and that is what we are doing here. The partnership between you and Judaism's spiritual mandate compels us that we MUST bring light into the world, together, as one.

Shmah Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Shannah tova

-
- ⁱ Paul Rogat, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: Perseverance And Hope In Troubled Times*, (New York: Basic books, 2014), p2.
- ⁱⁱ IBID, p2
- ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, Danusha Veronica Goska, *Political Paralysis*, p 60
- ^{iv} Perkei Avot, 2:16 R Tarfon
- ^v Paul Rogat, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: Perseverance And Hope In Troubled Times*, (New York: Basic books, 2014), p338.
- ^{vi} Genesis 32:25-33
- ^{vii} Midrash, Exodus
- ^{viii} Paul Rogat, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: Perseverance And Hope In Troubled Times*, (New York: Basic books, 2014), p7-8.
- ^{ix} IBID p338-341
- ^x IBID 338.
- ^{xi} IBID, 235
- ^{xii} Sally Mundell, *Packaging Good: The Healing Therapy of Giving (release date 12/17)*
- ^{xiii} Paul Rogat, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: Perseverance And Hope In Troubled Times*, (New York: Basic books, 2014), Poet David White, *Consolations*, p40
- ^{xiv} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, p289