

Temple Emanu-El RHS 5780 Sermon

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Shana tova!

Instead of a Rosh HaShanah sermon this morning (afternoon), what if I told you a story?

An amazing story that hints at the mystical.

A story of courage, of challenging the impossible, and second chances.

What if I told you a story of faith and the Jewish people?

As if that were not enough, let's take this story into outer space...all the way to the moon.

Let's include in this story a launching of our civilization's knowledge into the cosmos, so that one day, eons from now, distant generations might retrieve it...and maybe those distant generations won't even be human.

This story will contain technological advances that seem like Science Fiction and great spiritual lessons that are inspiring not only to our people but, to people around the world.

Want to hear it? Ok!

Our story begins with your ancestor, Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob found himself at a crossroads. In front of him lay the world as it was, a looming reality of uncertainty and violence. The forces of his day seemed to demand of him: "Submit! You can do nothing. The world is as it is."

In the dark of the night, when Jacob was most vulnerable, an angel confronted him and they fought. The angel, with the weight of reality behind it, was strong. But so was Jacob. Sometimes things got tough, really tough, and Jacob would be bent in pain. Jacob, your ancestor, found reserves of strength, and creativity, and kindness, and light which challenged the angel in ways that are still unfolding. To Jacob, that night of struggle seemed like centuries...millennia... until finally, still locked in combat, the morning light began to crest the distant horizon.

"Let me go," said the angel, "for here comes the day's new dawn."

"I won't let you go," replied Jacob, "unless you bless me first."

And so the angel gifted Jacob a blessing that still echoes from that moment until today, "No longer will Jacob be your name, but Yisrael, (*Ki SarEtah Im Elohim v'Im Anashim VaToChal*) for you have struggled with divine forces and with mankind, and you have overcome."(G32:29)

In that moment, everything changed.

Jacob became Yisrael, which means "God wrestler." One who challenges the self-imposed limits of humanity.

This is our origin story. For this blessing was passed down to Israel's children, and then to their children, and to every Jew who ever lived, including we who are here today. Jacob's blessing as "God wrestler" is in our spiritual DNA.

But look what I've done. Such chutzpah to summarize 4,000 years in a breath. Like Jacob's long night of struggle, our history had times of severe pain and had times of incredible hope. Back and forth, through seasons and continents, lands and lifetimes we have struggled with freedom over oppression, justice over chaos, kindness over strength, and knowledge over apathy. There were years which held onto these Jewish ideals like a ship-wrecked man to a floating plank; and there were years when we could shine our Jewish values into the world as *Or Goyim*, a light unto the nations.

On Jacob's new name, and the blessing that it carried, the ancient Jewish Kingdom called itself Israel, and over thousands of years it too rose and fell, rose and fell... our people scattered to the corners of the earth.

Overwhelmingly, exile from The Land was a harsh place to be. We Jews were forced to depend on the fickle whims of local lords. In most of these places only the wind utters the names of the countless multitude that we call *Kiddush HaShem*, Jews killed because, and only because, they were Jews.

Again, the forces of the day seemed to say to us, "Submit! You can do nothing. The world is as it is."

But we refused. We struggled. We resisted.

One form of resistance that we Jews have always wielded is prayer. In the hidden chambers of our collective soul, we pray to God for things to change, and we pray for strength so that we each might do our part to change them.

For two-thousand years of exile, we Jews would pray three times a day to return to The Land of our ancestors, where we could live in safety, with freedom, and in peace. In this land, Jews would once again find our feet beneath us, on our own sovereign soil.

Another form of Jewish resistance was through education, teaching our boys and our girls not just how to read, but how to think. Not just how to answer, but how to question. In every land that we lived the Jew was known for ingenuity, being resourceful, and for our love of *Torah L'shmah*, higher study for its own sake.

Who could have predicted, or orchestrated, all of the ingredients to make modern-day Israel the quintessential 'start-up nation': Jacob's challenge to reality's status quo, countless Jewish prayers seeking improvement and change, Herzl's chutzpah, our Youth's indomitable spirit, and the collective drive of Jewish immigrants from across the earth. Add to this the Jewish culture's obsession with education, and zeal for breaking the boundaries of what is possible.

It was in modern Israel, where biblical prophets echo against Tel Aviv think-tanks, that 'the call' was heard. Like a herald of old trumpeting a challenge throughout the lands, in 2009, Google put forth...a quest. The prize was \$30 million dollars to any private team that could send an

unmanned spacecraft to the moon! Engineers would have to build, launch, and safely land the spaceship.

Only three space programs had ever done this, and all of them superpower nations, at tremendous expense: the Soviet Union, China, and America. Scientists predicted that this challenge would propel humankind into a new era of space exploration by drastically reducing the cost, and pushing the boundary of new technologies.

Quickly, would-be champions began to gather, with two dozen well-funded companies from across the globe all seeking the fame of the Lunar X Prize. The question was: could it be done? And if so, who would do it first?

Yonaton Winetraub wanted to give it a try. At the age of 22, the young man from Israel had spent a year at NASA's Ames Research Center in California. But try as he might, he couldn't find anyone "crazy enough" to join him. Until one night he met up with two friends at a Tel Aviv bar. Yariv Bash was a computer scientist and Kfir Damari an entrepreneur. Over drinks, the friends got to talking.

So what that they had no real experience.

So what that they were competing against private companies who were years ahead of them.

So what that it would cost millions just to get started.

They had drive, they had faith that they could figure it out, and they had heart. By the end of the evening, the three friends were determined, and their non-profit called SpaceIL was born.

Their spacecraft was eventually named Beresheet, which is the first word in Torah and means, 'in the beginning.' The beginning of a New Year. The beginning of an adventure. The beginning of a movement.

SpaceIL's first office was so bare, so low-tech, that it didn't even have air conditioning. Up two flights of dingy stairs, into a room with threadbare carpet and dim lighting. But inside were some of our smartest, most talented, knowledge-hungry youth.

One of them, Amit Levin, was only 15 years old when he was recruited out of Tel Aviv University. A physics prodigy from a tiny village, Amit's task was to find a landing spot for Beresheet by analyzing NASA photographs of the moon's surface with an algorithm he created.ⁱ

Another was Adam Green, one of the 'old men' of the team at 24 years old. With a master's degree in Engineering, Adam's job was to plan the spacecraft's route. He had never launched anything into space. But, as he expressed with a shrug, neither had anyone else in Israel.

Over the coming months, SpaceIL recruited other space evangelists, over 200 of them, 95% of them, volunteers. None of them had ever worked on a moon mission before. Every aspect of the spacecraft presented a new challenge, especially as SpaceIL struggled to keep the craft lightweight and on budget.ⁱⁱ

The Google deadline came and went without a winner, but by this time, SpaceIL's mission had taken a life of its own.

Before long, sending Bereeshit to the moon had become a matter of Jewish, and national Israeli pride. Shimon Peres, channeling 4000 years of Jewish tradition, blessed the endeavor, saying, "I am proud of the youngsters who created this initiative, to put the first Israeli spacecraft on the moon, and I know that they can achieve it."ⁱⁱⁱ

You see, for Israelis and Jews all over, this became more than just going to the moon, it was a reminder to us that big ideas matter. Thinking beyond our self-imposed limits allows us to transcend. It reminds us that we are part of something bigger...that we are part of something grand.

Big ideas like this bind us together as a community, and show us what we can achieve when we work together...the Jewish people, and the human race. It forces us to ask the question, if we really set our collective minds to it, what in the world could we not achieve?

To me, one of the best parts of this story was the intention of the three founders. More than to win the prize, they hoped that this project would connect kids in Israel to science, and to connect Jewish kids abroad to Israel.

We saw this last year when AIPAC invited Yonaton Winetraub to speak at Temple Emanu-El. He spoke to our kids right here in this Sanctuary about SpaceIL, and Israel's quest to land Bereeshit on the moon. In all of my years as a rabbi, I've never seen children so taken with anything Israel. It was a lesson, on many levels, for us all. Our connection to Israel can be more than reacting to the crisis du jour, we should, together, celebrate Israel's courage, attempts, and successes to bring the world from where it is, to where it could be.

On February 22, 2019, Beresheet launched from Cape Canaveral, hitching a ride-share out of Earth's atmosphere on another craft, the SpaceX Falcon 9. Once out of orbit, for more than a month, Bereeshit was guided by a command center in Yehud, Israel. After three loops around Earth, the entire mission depended on complicated maneuvers to precisely enter Beresheet into an elliptical lunar orbit, and then adjust Beresheet's flight pattern into a circular orbit around the moon itself.^{iv}

As it entered the final frontier, the spacecraft took a selfie with Earth and Israel in the background. On the corner of the spacecraft, there is a plaque that reads, "small country, big dreams."

In its final form, Beresheet was light and nimble, and incredibly efficient. It weighed only 350 pounds and cost a tiny fraction of what NASA spends on a spacecraft.

In addition to its scientific innovations, Beresheet carried a nano-library containing over 30 million pages of books, including "dictionaries in 17 languages, encyclopedias, books of art and science, and information about discoveries that have influenced the world."^v

How Jewish is that! The People of the Book have created the first library on the moon!

But Beresheet also carried with it the greatest pieces of the Jewish civilization: the Torah, memoirs of a Holocaust survivor, Israel's national anthem, stories written by Jewish children, a copy of the Israeli Declaration of Independence, and the Israeli flag. In short, our best attempt to preserve our journey, who we are, and who we one day aspire to be. That time capsule, in its essence, is our collective Jewish prayer.

And so we watched with bated breath as Beresheet hurtled its way toward the moon. But in the final moment, the craft's main engine stopped operating. From a quarter-million miles away, its system was reset and brought back online, but by that time it was too late. Beresheet had been falling for too long and it crashed onto the moon's surface.

Clearly, this was unexpected, after having come so far... at the last moment... to fall.

It was a fall, but it was not a fail.

The Beresheet spirit that signified a beginning will reverberate for ages to come. Hundreds of young men and women who worked at SpaceIL have since started dozens of projects with their experience.

A generation of kids now want to explore the bounds of what might be possible; some through science, some through Israel.

A 2nd chance mission is already in motion, and the nano-library is believed to be fully intact.

A generation of youth, through the efforts of SpaceIL, has been empowered to be hopeful, and curious. They have been taught to lean into the big questions that the human race needs to face.

With the resolve of our ancestor Jacob, whose wrestling with the angel is the epitome of hope in the darkest of night, we too can struggle to determine what is possible, and what will be our future.

On this Rosh HaShannah, may we be worthy of the name 'Israel, God-wrestler', to transcend and to overcome the self-imposed limits which keep us from changing our reality.

Like the blast of a rocket, the sound of the shofar lifts up our prayers.

Baruch atah Adonai, Shomei-a Kol t'ruat amo Yisrael b'rachamim.

Blessed are You in our lives, Adonai, You hear, with love, the shofar:

True voice of Your people...Israel.

Please rise together to hear and echo the shofar's call.

ⁱ <https://forward.com/news/israel/175464/one-giant-step-for-israel-as-company-plots-moon-la/>

ⁱⁱ footnote

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in The Forward (date, link)

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/science/beresheet-israel-moon-orbit.html>

^v <https://www.wired.com/story/a-crashed-israeli-lunar-lander-spilled-tardigrades-on-the-moon/>