

Rosh HaShanah - 5782ⁱ

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Shanah Tova.

It goes without saying that this past year has been a really tough one for everyone.

Covid-19 has taken its toll on our health, our school and work, and on our safety, in ways that we could never have imagined.

We had hoped that the vaccine would be the solution.

But as we know, the human condition is still rife with inexplicable behavior.

Like you, most days I feel frustrated. Some days I get scared. And once in a while, I experience a draining sense of fatigue.

I have my moments. I do. Even my optimistic nature feels battered and torn. This surprises me. I'm not used to feeling down.

Fortunately, my wife and kids are usually enough to raise my spirits again. And of course, our synagogue community, with all the tremendous good that comes with it, nourishes me. Like Rosh HaShanah morning, it renews me. And I need it.

I look back on this past summer with a sense of longing, when the Covid numbers were low and a cautious optimism was in the air.

While our kids were at camp, Marita and I decided that we wanted to reclaim some of what we had lost in this past year. We wanted to see our friends.

One night, we had dinner with David and Amanda Lower. He is the Senior Pastor at Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody. She teaches children at The Mount Vernon School. Most of the time when we get together we laugh, and talk about our kids, and tell stories, but on this night the conversation got serious and really affected me.

We talked about Justice- and how some people have it, while many others don't. For every two-steps forward, we take a step back. Hate and racial tension have been weaponized and attempts for progress are challenged in every way imaginable.

We talked about Covid, of course, but mostly how horrified we were that public health has been politicized to the point of self-destruction. We were doubtful, extremely doubtful, if anyone at all had the political will to set our nation straight, or the power to actually do so. Our bitterly divided America has become a cliché, locked in a 'cold civil war' which threatens to boil over.

And...we talked about the Environment. This was, for me, the most painful part of the conversation. Man-made conditions have finally erupted into record temperatures all over the world, with never-before-seen floods, a frequency of hurricanes, and melting Polar ice caps. Nations of the earth are slow to react, when they bother to react at all. And the vast

majority of humankind shrug their collective shoulders, feeling helpless, even as the clock continues to tic.

“What kind of world are we handing over to our children?” my clergy friend asked from across the table. “What kind of life will they have?”

We began to search for solutions, grasping at every possible ‘straw’ we could rationally think of. But each one was deemed ‘highly unlikely’, or even ‘impossible’ against the intricate wall of intractable divisions. How could a people, a nation, a world who could not seem to agree on even the most basic, self-evident, facts, hope to agree on any widespread meaningful action? It would take a catastrophe, we decided, and nobody in their right mind would ever hope for that.

Finally, out of reasonable options, we defaulted to: “Well, someone will step up.”

Someone with clarity enough to cut through all the confusion, and charisma enough to unite our country, and the entire world.

“Sounds like,” I shared with the Pastor, knowing it was a loaded suggestion, “what we need is a Messiah.”

And he agreed. Only if... somebody to appear like Superman in the distance, and rush forward in the nick of time, to save the proverbial day.

“What is the Jewish view of the Messiah?” He asked me.

I thought about it for a moment. “It’s complicated,” I answered him. And it is. There is a lot of history and upheaval in the answer. “But basically,” I told him, “in the Progressive Jewish world, it can be summed up as: ‘There Is No Messiah. And You Are It.’”

There Is No Messiah. And You Are It.

This line is not my own, although I wish it were. It is the title of Rabbi Robert Levine’s book,ⁱⁱ written in the wake of September 11, when our nation was at the lowest low we had felt in generations. In it, he traces the history of Jewish messianic thought and its evolution into our present day Jewish consciousness.

Now, let’s clear the air for a moment.

When I say the word, ‘Messiah’, what do you think of? And what do you feel?

We Jews tend to have a visceral reaction to the word Messiah.

I’ve been teaching a monthly Finding God class since I came to Temple Emanu-El, and when I asked them this question, their answers were very telling. First of all, even me asking them this question made them uncomfortable. The term ‘messiah’ evokes collective Jewish memories of forced conversions and Anti-Semitism, of being accused and maligned. For many of us, Messiah is a Christian belief, and to an extent, at least in this day and age, that is mostly true. But it wasn’t always so.

The other answer that my Finding God class shared, was that for modern, rational thinkers, Messiah was dangerous 'wishful thinking' - that someone was going to come in and solve all of our problems for us.

However, we all agreed that the 'idea' of messiah, against the backdrop of a society feeling prolonged despair was an audacious act of 'hope.' One that we admired, even if we did not share it. For what was the alternative? To accept that our situation is, and always will be, 'hopeless'? That things could never get better? That we would inevitably continue to spiral in unyielding patterns of human self-destruction?

Messiah, as we say in English, comes from the Hebrew word, *Massiach*, which means 'anointed one'.ⁱⁱⁱ Originally 'Massiach' referred to High Priests,^{iv} emperors, and kings. They were all human beings, with nothing supernatural about them.

But with time, the term 'Massiach' began to take on a much more loaded context, one that reflected religious obsession with eschatology (*esk-a-tology*), the term for conditions that will lead to the end of the world.

Understand, that for Jews, throughout our long history, exile and war, return and security, had become the norm. Each time that we re-built our communities, we hoped that this time things would be different, but eventually chaos and destruction would follow. This pattern is not unique to the Jews, most civilizations that rise will fall, but our response to the pattern became engrained in our Jewish collective psyche.

Rather than view the world nihilistically, viewing everything as meaningless; or, that we were being punished by a vengeful God; a messianic theology developed that all of the war and upheaval that we were experiencing were actually the ‘birth-pangs’ of the Messiah, who would lead us not only back to safety in our land, but would change the nature of reality itself. Yes, the wars and profound uncertainty were happening, no one could deny that, but they were happening *for a reason*. For a purpose. Which meant that even if we did not like God’s plan, at least there was a plan, and we were, in our own passive way, part of it.

We see this reflected in the High Holiday imagery of the Safar Chayim, the Book of Life, where our fate, and God’s will, is recorded.

בְּרֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתָּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתָּמוּן.

On Rosh HaShanah this is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed:

Who will live, and who will die...who by fire, and who by water, who by war, and who by beast.^v

I hesitate to reduce 3000 years of Jewish history into a pattern, but each age of Jewish immigration and accomplishment was cut short by major historical upheavals. The spread of Islam and the Crusades, expulsions and finally, at the end of the Jewish Renaissance in Spain, came the Spanish Inquisition.

Each time tragedy befell us, Jewish fervor increased for the Messiach.

When the Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition found refuge in the Ottoman empire, a small group of Jewish mystics moved into the mountain city of Safed. There, with creative courage, they challenged this assumption of a calculating, punishing God, in a profound way. “Maybe we have it all wrong?” they said. “Maybe there is not an all-powerful God who is ‘doing’ this to us. Maybe God is, like us, ‘broken and scattered’. Maybe God is, like us, battling forces of chaos and evil in the world. Maybe God is, like us, trying to heal and become whole. They saw the world as broken, because God is broken.”^{vi}

But rather than despair, these kabbalists put forth a worldview of Jewish empowerment unlike anything seen before. It leaned on Torah stories, the glue of the Jewish civilization, that put each of us as individuals, and we as a Jewish people, in partnership with God to *tikkun Olam*, to heal the world, one intentional act at a time. We call these intentional acts, as they are prescribed in our tradition, *mitzvot*.

In this way, the Jews of Safed posited, just as we need God, God needs us. We are partners in this endeavor. Without us, God would remain ‘limited’. Without us, the world would remain broken. This theological reframing reclaimed the sacred Brit, our Covenant, with God. But with an orientation that empowered each of us, and required each of us, to actively,

and intentionally, do our part. Then, and only then, would both God, and the world, become whole and healed.

And who would benefit from this redemption? The Jews, of course, but not only the Jews. Everyone. All people. The entire world. Theirs became, for the first time, a universal messianism. The Kabbalists of Safed were way less focused on any one individual Messiah; but rather they strove for a Messianic Age. We Jews, each of us, were the absolute key to creating a just reality conducive for all people to be safe, healthy, and secure.

לֹא-יִשְׂאוּ גּוֹי אֶל-גּוֹי חֶרֶב, וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּן עוֹד מִלְחָמָה Nations shall beat their swords into plowshears...and nations shall know war no more. A time when everyone will be able to sit beneath their vine and fig-tree, living in peace and unafraid.^{vii'}

לא בַּשָּׁמַיִם הִיא ...^{viii'} "It's not something that is beyond us," they claimed, but rather, it is well within our grasp to fully realize our potential as a vital partner with God to fix our broken world.^{ix}

Jewish messianic thought has evolved: from a Messiah who will deliver us back to our land, to one who will change the reality of the world, to a messianic age where we will each/ be part of bringing about the conditions/ that we dream the world could be. However, all of the messianic ideas that we Jews have held have one thing in common: A longing, a desperate yearning. The world is broken. Yes. And the Jew, at his/her core, yearns to fix it. To nourish it. To heal it.

Yes, the world is a mess. And it's perfectly human to throw up our hands and have doubts about being able to change anything. But the yearning, the longing, the striving to make things better is the core of Judaism; and the texture of what it means to be a Jew.^x

Proverbs tells us that "when there is no vision, the people perish."^{xi} Perhaps the idea of a 'Messianic age' is not as accurate as it is to say that we are on 'messianic journey',^{xii} ...with no guarantees that we will succeed. Our Jewish vision has evolved into directing the very best of who we are towards Justice and Peace and Love. Then will everyone 'sit beneath their vine and fig tree, in peace and unafraid.' This is what it could be. This is the vision. But we have to do the work.

Modern, Reform, Judaism has taken this to its logical conclusion,^{xiii} 'There is no Messiah,' we say, at least, there is no one person who is going to do all the work for us.

'And you are it.' You are the one. And so is the person on either side of you.^{xiv} And on either side of them. The one. But we cannot wait. You are needed.

Far from helpless, Judaism assures us, you have the power to love more deeply, to be more compassionate, and to better engage the world around us. That is our charge. That is what we have been telling ourselves for hundreds of generations. That is our mission.

Ours is a demanding tradition. It can feel overwhelming that Judaism asks so much of us.

This is what we mean, on Rosh HaShanah, when we talk about *teshuvah*. It is an acknowledgment that we can become more than we currently are, better than we have been.

And this has huge implications for each of us, and the world that we live in.

That life is more than about roaming the earth. The years that we have, in the end, come down to 'meaning.'

What kind of husband or wife could I be? Sister or brother? Child or grandparent? Citizen of the world? Jew? Congregant at Temple Emanu-El? These questions help us reorient ourselves, return to our vision of how we can do the sacred work of protecting each other, and healing our surroundings.

As long as we keep our Jewish vision before us and engage in our relationships that allow us to do the work, then we each can see ourselves as being part of the same messianic journey.

One that our people have been on since time, as we know it, began.

There is no Messiah. And you. Are. It.

Shanah tovah

ⁱ Thanks to Rabbi Robert Levine for his book, and our conversation. Gratitude to Rabbi Eli Herscher for talking through the big ideas, and for his torah that continues to emanate to the world. And finally, to my soul-mate, hevrutah for life, and editor of this sermon, Marita Anderson, for getting this sermon (and me) across the proverbial ‘finish line.’

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Robert N. Levine, D.D., [There IS No Messiah and you’re it: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism’s Most Provocative Idea](#). Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT. 2003

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, p7

^{iv} i.e.- 2 Samuel 7:13; for more, see Flusser, David. "[Second Temple Period](#)". *Messiah*. Encyclopaedia Judaica 2008. The Gale Group. Retrieved 2 December 2012.

^v Mishkan HaNefesh, Yom Kippur Morning Service, pg 212

^{vi} For a summary of Lurianic Kabbalah, the shattered vessels, and the Jewish role of tikkun Olom in Kabbalistic thought, see Robert Levine’s, *There Is No Messiah, And You Are It*, chapter 9: Kabbala’s Call: We Are The Messiah

^{vii} Micah 4:3-4

^{viii} Deut 30:12, Talmud b. Baba Metzia 59b

^{ix} Also see R’ Shneur Zalman’s *The Tanya*, which professes that each Jew has a role in readying the world for the messiah.

^x Thank you Rabbi Eli Herscher, for the conversation around this topic, and some of the language.

^{xi} Proverbs 29:18

^{xii} This term was shared with me by Rabbi Eli Herscher, in recounting his conversation with Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver (son of Rabbi Abba Silver) from sometime in the 1980’s

^{xiii} See 1885 Pittsburgh Platform

^{xiv} See compilation of midrashim to this effect through David Patterson’s article, *On Being a Jewish Author: The Trace of the Messiah in Eli Wiesel’s Novels*.