

A Season of Loss

Shanah Tovah u'm'tukah, may we all be written in the Book of Life for a good year, a year of peace, a year of joy. May we see a year in which a cure or a vaccine will be found, a year in which we can all come together here in this beautiful sanctuary to pray together, to hug each other, to be the community we were. People have said that things will not be the same when the threat of the virus is gone, and that is true, but some things will be the same. The touch of a hand on a hand, what it feels like to tell someone your troubles face to face, the ancient words of our prayers-- those things will not change.

But no matter how slowly or quickly things go back to normal, no matter what 'normal' will mean to us six months or a year from now, right now we are in a period of darkness, right now we are in a time of stress and pain. I remember writing a Shabbat sermon in March, the first one after we stopped holding services together in the sanctuary. I wrote it not knowing if I would deliver it or not. When I did deliver it, streaming live on Facebook from the cantor's phone, I was hoping it would be the last sermon I gave online.

And here we are, half a year later.

In the past six months, we have reached out to each other, we have prayed with each other, we have learned with each other, we have had many, many online meetings. We have learned more about our own strength. Nonetheless, the past six months have been hard, and the future will continue to be hard. This is hard.

In May, we had a Pulpit and Ritual Committee meeting to discuss the High Holidays. Cantor Sharett-Singer and I said that we felt that we should do what we can on the holidays to evoke the beautiful services that we have had here in the past. Although things would be different, we would try to make them as similar as possible.

At a committee meeting in July, a congregant and dear friend said that this year's services could not be anything like services in years past. He suggested we embrace the differences, think outside the box, start from scratch.

He was right that, no matter how hard we tried to replicate the grandeur, the majesty of our holiday services of years past, we would fall short. He was right, too, when he said that the essence of our High Holiday services, the core, would not change. The story of our search for meaning, our search for wholeness, would still be there, despite the technology that mediates between us.

This is always the message of the holidays. Our lives are fragile. Our future is uncertain. Our connection with Gd is tenuous. We are here to pray that our lives may continue, that we will have health. We are here to request that our future be better than our present. We are here to seek to rebuild that relationship with Gd, to become once more aware of the holiness that our ancestors saw all around them.

This year of all years, we are even more conscious of our fragility, of the perilous future that lies before us. This year we need wholeness more than ever. We admit that, as we confront the fact that the past six months have been a time of great

loss.

We are here, we are hopeful, we are worshipping together. But we are wracked by our many losses over the past half a year. All of us have lost time, time that will not be returned. Many of us have lost precious time that we would have spent with grandchildren, or with grandparents. How many Passover seders do you expect to have in your lifetime? How many times do you expect to sit together with your family and your friends, with your well worn, wine-stained hagaddahs, with all of your family traditions? We have lost one of those precious seders.

Some of us have lost vacations that we had been planning. Children have lost time in school. Not just time, but learning. We do not yet know how or whether they will regain what they have lost.

People have lost jobs. People have lost money. Investments have become worthless. Businesses have closed. Some people here may have lost a favorite restaurant.

Others may have lost a company they spent years building. We do not know what the economic situation of our country and the world will be, when this pandemic is finally over. We only know our economy has suffered a terrible blow, and recovery may well be difficult, and uneven.

Most importantly, we have lost people. We have lost friends, we have lost parents, we have lost relatives. Some of the people we have lost have died, not from Covid 19, but from other causes. Nevertheless, because of the pandemic, we lost the opportunity to be with them at the end, to accompany them to their final resting place, and we lost our opportunity to mourn according to Jewish tradition-- with funeral and hesped and shiva.

We are here this evening together as a Riverdale Temple family to celebrate the Jewish New Year. We are here to look forward, and to renew our commitment to our Gd and our religion. But the weight of our losses makes it difficult to look forward.

Even this service itself speaks of loss. If we were together in this sanctuary tonight, if it were just like last year's service, perhaps we could temporarily forget all of our loss. Perhaps we would feel that Gd is with us, that we were together with all of our Riverdale Temple family, that we were praying together with Jews all over the world.

But this year is not like last year. We are here once again on the computer. Without an organ. Without a choir. Without the friends whom we know so well, going through what we are going through. Last year we saw people we only see about once a year, or perhaps people we see every week. But they were dressed in their best, here with us in the sanctuary, having just come from a big family dinner. Like us, they were looking forward to a new year, anxious to hear the music, the beautiful words of our prayers. We shook their hands and said '*yasher koach*' when they came down from the bimah after having their honor, their '*aliyah*,' in the service.

I know that many of our congregants look forward to their *aliyah*. You are a little nervous, hoping you will come up at the right time. You were not sure if you even wanted to do it, but then you did it, and it was good. You came up on this *bimah*, lit candles, said blessings, opened the doors of the ark, opened the *parochet*, the curtain.

And now you are at home. I hope all of the people we wanted to honor are online right now, watching this service, but I don't know if they are. We brought those people up here last year because we loved them, because we wanted to thank them for being members of our family. Last year, at this service, we honored: Jackie Gardner, Michael Friedman, Janine Fetsco, Joyce White and Michael Smith. We honored Scott Sirkin and Fay Stasky, Steven Zelkowitz and Amy Samuelson, Peter Sack, Sandy Lerner, and Diane and Rachel Strom.

I say to them all, thank you for all you have done for Riverdale Temple. I wish we could honor you in person tonight, but the ability to do that is more more thing that we have lost.

What are we to do in the face of all of this loss? How are we to go on? How are we to have hope?

Traditional Judaism tells us that Gd is just and fair. If we are good people, Gd will watch over us and protect us. If things seem dark now, it is only because Gd has a plan that we do not yet fully comprehend.

If only! I don't believe in that understanding of our world, and I don't think most of you do either. Things are bad, but they can get worse. Gd will not limit the loss that we may suffer. It is for this very reason that we may not give up. It is for this very reason that we must look towards the future, and take whatever steps we can to make things better. Yes, we acknowledge our losses. Yes, we mourn our losses. And then we move on.

Our service this evening epitomizes that attitude. This is not the service any of us would have chosen. But we are here, doing the best we can. Gd willing, our service next year will be different. Gd willing we will be back in the sanctuary, with our choir and our organist. But no matter what happens, we will still have a Rosh Hashanah service next year. We will still wish each other a good year. We will still renew our relationship to the the Holy One, blessed be Gd's name. We will still do our best, our very best, to make ourselves better people. To make this world a better world. And we will never give up. We will never give up.

We will mourn our losses, even as we are still in this season of loss. And we will heal. Slowly or quickly, as best we can. We will let the love of those around us bring us healing. We will let the guide of our ancient traditions bring us healing. We will let the support of our congregational family bring us healing.

The High Holidays have always been an opportunity to recommit to the central tenet of our religion-- that the world is a holy place, and that we have a sacred role in making things go the way they ought to go. In the face of all of our loss, this is more true than ever. We do not choose whether our path is smooth or rough, whether the road is easy or hard, but we do choose to keep going. We do choose to make our lives a blessing.

I pray that we will all be written in the Book of Life for a better year, a year without so much loss in it! A year of recovery, a year of healing, and a year of holiness.