

Sermon - Love, Loss, and the High Holidays

It's hard to believe it's been just over a year that I've stood here, with this congregation. Well, not HERE exactly. For the last six months, I've sat with you in my dining room, my office, my family room, even my kitchen counter! Suffice it to say, it has not been the first year that I expected as your Senior Rabbi. And it has not been the year that many of us expected. It's been filled with sudden turns, loss, grief, anger and resentment. But it's also been a year of growth. A year of innovation, of resiliency, of healing, and even of hope and happiness. It's been a year of silver linings, of learning, of challenge and of pursuit. And, while I could have done without so much change right away, with this pandemic, I have to say that I am thrilled to be here and thrilled that Temple Chaverim is my home.

I want to share something personal with you. It's rare for me to get overly personal in a sermon. It's not that I'm embarrassed or ashamed to share myself with you, but rather that I feel like it can be self-serving, and I don't want that to distract from the messaging. I can usually make my point using facts and statistics or anecdotes and Jewish values to frame any particular lesson. But sometimes, sometimes we have experiences in life

that we cannot ignore. And, as your rabbi, I think it's important that I try to share the personal with you - so you can see that we are human too and that our lives lend themselves to lessons as well. The Holidays are a time of deep introspection, reflection, and coming to terms with all that has happened and all that we are. So here I am.

A year ago, at this time, I was incredibly excited. It was my first High Holidays with all of you and we were gearing up to make it a great one. And, I was also ten weeks pregnant with my second child. But, three days before Rosh Hashanah, the unthinkable happened. I had a miscarriage. And suddenly, everything in my world was spinning upside down. How was I supposed to lead my wonderful new community, for days and hours on end, when I was emotionally battered, physically in pain, and mentally anywhere but here?

It was one of the most challenging moments of my life. It wasn't easy. I was terrified to stand up in front of you, on Rosh Hashanah, and not know how I would physically or emotionally feel. I wasn't sure how to be inspiring and present when I was suffering, in silence, because I felt less than whole. I didn't know how to process my own grief and anger and sadness when I had to focus on being a spiritual leader for everyone else.

But then I remembered that life isn't always easy and we have a choice to curl up in a ball and wish it all away. Or, we can do something about it. And I did two things to get through: 1) I dug deep into my well of reserves and my support system AND 2) I let myself honor and feel every emotion that I needed to feel and I expressed it outwardly.

And what I came to realize was that I was stronger than I ever thought possible. I could take a monumental challenge and I could experience it and I could come out the other side. I had everything I needed to do it, inside of me, and in those closest to me. I just had to rely on my inner self to get through it.

Digging into our own personal well of reserves is hard. But it's not impossible. In many ways, it reminds me of the lessons we learn from a seashell. When we were little, no doubt, many of us held a seashell up to our ears because someone told us we could hear the ocean in it, even if we were a hundred of miles away from the ocean. So, in disbelief, we tested the theory. We held it up to ears and, lo and behold, there was the sound of rushing waves. Little did we know that what we were actually listening to was the sounds of blood rushing in our own heads. The shell created an echo chamber for our ears. And what we were listening to, was, in fact, inside of us the whole time.

What a metaphor for what it is that we need when we yearn for strength or salvation from the difficulties in our lives! All we need to do is but look inside of us, deep inside, to realize that there is beauty and power within. When we're in the midst of a crisis, or grief, though, it's hard to find the closest seashell around you. So, instead, I urge you to turn to those whom you trust to help become your echo chamber. To help you see all the strength you hold and to help carry you when you are unsure of what is next. Digging in to your reserves doesn't just mean relying on your own inner strength, but also the strength of those around you who can carry you when life gets difficult.

I could not have been so successful, at this time last year, without the tremendous help and support of my family and friends. But the real people who carried me when I was scared and sad, were my co clergy, Rabbi Bennet and Cantor Hyman. They checked in on me, they let me slow down by picking up some of my pieces, they seamlessly created space, gentle and safe space, for me to ask for what I needed and to offer help when I was struggling. They helped me dig deep into my well and they never let me feel alone. I was able to do my job better because I was unafraid - they provided me with a safety net if I needed to fall, and they supported my emotional and physical well-being. They were my seashell when I so

desperately needed a reminder of what the ocean sounded like - that beautiful power that lay deep inside.

We, as human beings, are incredibly strong and resilient and we have deep wells of reserves that many of us don't even know we have until they are tested. Human rights activist Natan Sharansky has spoken to thousands of people around the world about how he survived nine years of isolation in the Soviet Gulag. How did he build his muscle of resilience and strength and dig deep, when he didn't have anyone around him to help hold up his seashell? He used the acronym SAFE: Support, Action, Faith, and Expression. He gained support from what little he had around him, rooted his action in hope that he would persevere and be able to teach others, kept faith that things would get better, and expressed himself outwardly never denying what he had been through. Keeping "SAFE" is what saved him, in his darkest hour. We learn from Sharansky that it is both digging deep inside yourself AND giving yourself permission to feel all that you're experiencing that helps you persevere.

In our High Holiday liturgy, we hear the deeply meaningful words of Unetaneh Tokef decreeing "who shall live and who shall die" followed by a litany of the possible outcomes any one of us might have. For many of us, it evokes emotion - sorrow and loss, sadness, fear, or even anger. But

what our liturgy suggests is that we cannot shy away. We cannot shy away from these emotions and we cannot shy away from the truth of the nature of our world - all that exists must pass. All that lives must die. It is a terrifyingly real concept that asks us to confront our own mortality and therefore everything about who we are. But instead of being terrified, our power lies in embracing the emotion that it evokes and in turning it into something more productive than fear. We use our emotions to process what is happening to us and HOW WE CAN USE IT, to help ourselves and to help others.

In an op Ed in the New York Times in January 2005, Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert argued that most people have a habit of “reasoning [their] way to happiness.” But Gilbert challenged us to resist that urge. He said “Outrage, anger, fear and frustration are unpleasant emotions that most of us vanquish through artful reasoning; but unpleasant emotions can spur us to action.”

Last year I was faced with a choice - I could push away all of my emotional grief and anguish. Or, I could feel it and I could use it. To be my most authentic self and to feel, deeply and meaningfully, the liturgy of the High Holidays. I could channel my emotions into being an exemplar and a leader and actually FEEL the things I was feeling. It sounds silly, but it's

hard to do sometimes. It's hard to not be scared that we'll sink so deeply into what we feel, that we may never recover. But if we ignore our emotions, not only will they always be there waiting for us, but we will have missed the opportunity to turn them into something meaningful.

It has been an incredibly hard year for all of us. Some of us have lost wages or jobs. Many of us have lost loved ones or gotten incredibly sick. Or we've had deep and real fear about a virus that we know VIRTUALLY nothing about. We've had to make decisions or come to grips with all the things that were not as we planned and went unfulfilled and unrealized. For many of us, it has been the hardest year of our lives. Physically and Emotionally. We are tired, broken, angry, and resentful. And, we don't really know what the future will hold. "When will things return to normal?" has been the question on all of our minds. Now, more than ever, we each need to dig deep into our well of reserves and feel the weight of our emotions, and spur ourselves into something more productive. We cannot let fear, isolation, loneliness or anger win. It's time for us to turn to our Judaism and our community and say "we will survive" and "we will get through this" no matter how scary, how stressful, and how hopeless it may all feel. Life isn't easy, but we have a choice. We can curl up into a ball and try and pretend it all away. Or, we can dig deep, find

support, express ourselves, keep our faith, and take action that is rooted in hope to persevere to the other side.

Action can be big or action can be small. It can look as small as simply getting out of bed, getting dressed and facing the day, head on. Or it can look as big as making change or creating awareness: Volunteer, start a campaign, raise money, or speak out. At the very end of the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer, we learn that, in fact, repentance, prayer and righteousness can change our fate. If we have faith, if we truly believe, and if we take action, we can indeed make the changes that will ultimately save us! As Rabbi Aaron Panken, of blessed memory, said "Our actions help us live in such a way that when we suffer life's darkest depredations, we will always have ways of coping with them. Our actions may not change the ultimate outcome one iota, but they alter our attitude, bolster our ability to withstand challenges...and see life's values amid chaos and dismay. Attitude and action go hand in hand and when we change one, it will always affect the other.

On Rosh Hashanah we are reminded of the joys and blessings of life. But Yom Kippur is more somber. We take a real and hard look at what has been and we think about what could be. The real struggles we each face, the difficulties we've had to endure, and the ways in which we can

commit ourselves to taking action and attitude and using it for good in the coming year.

Not only have we had personal struggles, but we've had national ones, as well. Whether you like it or not, we are a country divided. There is a deep fracture and pain within the soul of our land. And it's growing deeper and wider, every day. We have watched, this year, as a movement erupted - a new civil rights movement demanding equal treatment and justice for all. It revealed the way that people of color are treated in our country, day in and day out, devalued as humans, feared and misunderstood. And there has been violence, protest, upheaval. And there has been hatred. And there has been political turmoil. And mistrust and pitting one against another. And it seems as though all of our national tension was just seething beneath the surface until it finally broke free, in this year that seems to be shedding light on all of the precariousness of the issues in our world.

What do we do? How can we fix this brokenness? I am reminded of the words of the late, great, John Lewis who said: "Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or

maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part."

Our High Holidays, whether we like it or not, force us to look deep within, to stare our fears and our anxieties and our brokenness right in the face and to say "the choice is mine." I can stand still or I can take action. I can sit in one place or I can be part of something greater. I can stay silent or I can speak out. I can choose sadness and fear or I can choose hope and love and happiness. All we have to do is dig deep into our well of reserves, let the emotions and feelings wash over us, and then commit to taking action. No matter how big or how small - the choice is up to you.

Grief and loss and brokenness happen. It's all part of life. It happened to me, and I know it's happened to you, and each one of this year has experienced it in some form or another. But it doesn't have to define us. We can turn it into something beautiful.

Like this story: There was an elderly Chinese woman who had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and half

pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its brokenness, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, because the crack in my side caused water to leak out all the way back to the house." The older woman smiled, "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your brokenness, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back you water them. Your brokenness turned into something beautiful for all the world to see."

Never be ashamed of what it is that makes you broken or what it is that you cannot do based on what you expected. Instead, take all of that hurt and grief and strife and turn it into something good, something useful, something beautiful.

I don't know what the future will bring - I'm a rabbi and in my line of work I don't get the opportunity to work very often with a crystal ball. I don't know when we'll find a vaccine for COVID 19, when the world will calm down, or we will treat each and every one of God's children fairly and

justly. I don't know who will live and who will die, who will see ripe age and who will not. I don't know what pain will come our way or what trials and tribulations we'll continue to endure. But I do know that life has its ups and its downs and it's how we weather these storms that matters most. I do know that it's how you react, respond, dig deep and feel what troubles you that will help you turn it into something productive. I know that if you bring forth what is inside of you, what you bring forth will save you. You are incredible - strong, resilient, brave, and full of wonder. You were made to withstand the difficulties of life. You were made to bring beauty into the world, even through your brokenness.

May this year be a year of blessing, of wholeness, of abundance and may your every dream be fulfilled. And if not, that's okay, too. We will embrace all that comes our way, find our strength within, and shine our light for the world to see.

May this be God's will - Amen.