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Rosh Hashanah

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Congregation Rodeph Sholom

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

### Dare to Hope

It won't be enough to simply talk about this pandemic which of course we'll do for many years. It has shaken us to the core and changed our perspective in many ways. Hopefully most of us will come out of COVID-19 with resolve to act—to live purposefully, to appreciate our blessings, and say so. This killer virus might actually jolt us into real change, we who usually are little inclined to change our ways.

In these surreal times we who are communal beings were forced to stifle our social instincts. Most of us have been alone much more than we like and often have been lonely during this terrible period.

You remember the rather humorous inquiry sent out some years ago. The question was: where would you like to sit during the High Holy Days?

I would prefer to sit in the

- Talking section
- Or no talking section

I want a seat located

- Near my in-laws
- Far from my in-laws
- Far from my ex-in-laws
- Close to God
- Far from God
- Near the exit

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I think we would take any of those seats right now, wouldn't we? We didn't ask for this but Jewish tradition reminds us that being alone, aloneness, has proven to be a magnificent motivator.

Abraham is alone in Haran when he hears God's call to go to a new land.

Jacob was alone when he wrestles with the angel and becomes a different person altogether.

Moses is alone when he confronts the burning bush and knows there was something he must do.

Retreating into self can actually be healthy if and only if it inspires within us the determination to return to community differently, determined to live and to act on our values. I want to point out that there is crucial difference between Hellenism and Hebraism. Behind the magnificent plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides is a conviction that all people are caught up in a predictable, divinely preordained plan. The future is always a replay of the past.

The Jews, contends historian Thomas Cahill, were the first people to break out of this cycle, the first people to contend that history need not repeat itself. The future is not preordained and we can shape the world going forward. Remarkably, according to Cahill, this is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.

But what will be our perspective as we face forward?

A noted journalist told this story:

I grew up in an observant city neighborhood where the smells of challah and chicken permeated the community every Friday. On the way to my synagogue there was always Joe. Joe would stand in front of the apartment building puffing on his Shabbat morning cigarette greeting us with a sly smile as we walked by. On Yom Kippur as we marched down eight flights of stairs to avoid using the elevator, Joe would greet us pushing the elevator button as he bit into his ham sandwich. All the grownups would shake their heads and murmur about how much Joe had lost in the concentration camps, how we have to try to understand him.

One day, when I was fifteen years old, I walk into shul on Yom Kippur and there was Joe dressed neatly, wearing squeaky clean white sneakers a large embroidered Kippah on his head. We stood still, bewildered at what we were seeing.

“Joe,” my dad gently asked him, “it is so nice to see you but what happened to you?”

Joe looked up, tears quickly filling his eyes. He softly answered, “Hitler is dead and I have a grandson.”

We can also get fresh perspective from people not born into Judaism, but who discover our faith and fall in love. Such a person wrote a poem called “Discovering Judaism” and I will share just a couple of lines:

In Judaism I found the enlarging embrace of inclusion:

No faith, no race, no ethnicity excluded

Not souls, but lives are we mandated to save

I am drawn to the faith that does not see sin inherited,

An indelible sin that may not be erased by repentance, repayment, repair.

Injuries there are, not visited by ancestors, but done to others and ourselves

Injuries for which I bear responsibility, the capability to repair.

I am attracted to the inextricable bond between belief and behavior

Faith demonstrated

Not with the declaration of my mouth

But with arms and legs

Believing and behaving the twin duties of the heart

A faith of inclusion. Just think of how we at Rodeph Sholom have opened our arms and hearts to people of other faiths, other nationalities, different sexual orientations, all part of one family, the uniquely special Rodeph Sholom family.

Faith demonstrated with arms and legs.

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This underscores what I have always said to you.

We are not what we say

We are not what we intend

We are not even what we pray

We are what we do.

Dr. Victor Frankl who survived Auschwitz taught us that only those who thought of others were able to survive the most wretched human experience imaginable.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the hut comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

And Frankl concludes further: "He who has a why to live can tolerate almost any how."

That is what our faith and our congregation have done for many years—provide the why—to make the world a better place for ourselves, yes, but also for those who have been beaten down and need to find some means to hope. You and I can provide those means.

We can reassure those struggling with depression or illness that they will not be abandoned.

We can reassure elderly relatives, friends, and congregants that they still have purpose and that we need them very much.

We can bring hope to the disadvantaged in several ways.

I am sure you read the powerful and painful story in the *Times* pointing out that thirty million Americans do not have enough to eat.

The New York City number far exceeds the national average. Forty percent of those are new to food assistance.

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If you read the incredible *New York Times Magazine* article on hunger, you learned that food stamps are routinely taken away from people without explanation or rationale. How absurd! How cruel!

Next month I will speak at West Side Campaign Against Hunger's Annual Luncheon underscoring our support for that vital West Side institution.

Another means of bringing hope is political involvement and advocacy, incredibly important in 2020. By the way, did you know there is a presidential election this year?

I am proud of the fact that a large number of our congregants have been involved in a non-partisan effort to encourage Americans across the country to exercise their right to vote. Turnout may be key.

The late Elie Wiesel gave a commencement address at Dartmouth some years ago and he concluded with some of these words:

Granted, the world you inherited is far from being safe and peaceful. But it is your task, and mine still, to improve it. Remember: one person's courageous initiative or moral commitment can make a huge difference and it has...And so today, my friends, let's celebrate the human being's power to transcend tragedy...Whether you know it or not, in some part of the planet, there are people who need you. They are waiting for you.

As we all know, we are going through a mighty tough time in our beloved New York City, but nobody should ever bet against us. We will rally to our greatness and our goodness because there are people who need you and because we really do care.

This is precisely our job as Jews, to bring light where there is darkness. I remember a comment made by famed New York Giant running back Tiki Barber during the election cycle of 2016. He was asked why more Black Americans were not engaged in the 2016 election. Tiki's answer was memorable: They are simply afraid to hope.

Our fellow citizens look to us this year and ask:

Can I hope?

Can I dream?

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Can my life be better than it is?

The same Elie Wiesel once asked, you want to know how to overcome despair? And his answer: by helping others overcome despair.

That must be our response to this pandemic. That must be our response to the covenant we signed together at Sinai, a covenant that includes the phrase “love your neighbor like yourself”.

Love your neighbor and thereby overcome despair—yours and theirs.

Dear neighbor, do not be afraid to hope. Why? Because I am here.

Because we are here.

Amen.