

## **The Continuing Acts of Creation**

*Gut Yontif! Shanah tovah m'tukah!* After the year we have had, we are urgently longing for a sweet, healthy, and peaceful New Year. Note that I did not mention the desire for us to return to a “normal” year. On Kol Nidrei I will talk about the plague of racism and antisemitism. On Yom Kippur I’ll explore the phenomenon of masks: masks to protect and masks that we hide behind. But this morning, as we begin the New Year 5781, we will address the experience that has forever changed the way we live. People talk about the new normal. Well, it seems that the new normal is simply getting used to sudden and unexpected change.

After six months of a pandemic, you’d think we’d be used to abrupt change. Our Yiddishe *Bubbes and Zaydes* would say *Mann tracht un Gott lacht*. Man plans and God laughs. Our grand plans and well-honed schedules can all crumble . . . but it is no laughing matter.

What kind of year has it been? Well, how about the most divisive political season in memory. International relations? How about China, Russia and Iran all trying to interfere in our elections. We’ve suffered from record heat waves (and since its Colorado, we have record lows the following days).

We've had disastrous forest fires that choke our skies, stinging our eyes with smoke and ash; struggling to breathe, sucking air through a suffocating mask, fogging our glasses and making us gasp.

Businesses tottering on bankruptcy, millions relying on Government decency, dependency, don't call it charity, they're just trying to pay the rent. Schools and shuls are struggling to connect with students and congregants. Isolation, frustration, quarantine, Zooming, face masks and asthma attacks. Technological glitches, itchy britches. Gyms closed, tight clothes, pants no longer fitting, Netflix binging; temperature checks, Zoom-bombing smart alecks. Squirting and rubbing sanitizer sauce, chapping our hands red at a high cost. And if that wasn't enough: racists, fascists, bigots and idiots who still dis Jews and spout hateful views about Israel.

And so, while we still have a few months left in 2020, take a breath and shout out a Halleluyah: THANK GOD 5780 NOW OFFICALLY IS OVER!

The escalating toll from the COVID-19 pandemic is heartbreaking. The virus has caused or contributed to the deaths of nearly 200,000 Americans and millions around the world.

It has shaken this proud nation to the core: tens of millions unemployed; businesses and schools closed, people isolated and quarantined.

Weddings, graduations, anniversaries, and precious family milestones have been postponed or shrunk to small gatherings. For goodness sakes, just going out for a date or trying to come to services is such a major ordeal that many are not willing or able to chance. Temple Sinai is one of the few synagogues with in-person services and even we are restricted to 100 people at a time . . . for the High Holy Days! It's not necessary to go into details about all the disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic because you are all well aware of them; we have been living with them for over six months . . . and there is no clear end in sight. Suffice it to say that this has been a financial and social catastrophe.

Some are saying that the pandemic has created a "new normal." Well, it is not the first time we have experienced a crisis that established a new normal. Last week, as we were commemorating the nineteenth anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attack, I noted the new normal that it created. Never again would taking a commercial airline be a breeze. Over time, we've gotten used to showing up two or three hours early for a flight in order to navigate the maze of security checks: taking our shoes off and walking through x-ray machines before boarding.

We are now used to being searched and going through scanners every time we enter a State or Federal building. And we now take it for granted that while security agencies that monitor calls and the internet make our lives safer, our privacy and personal information have been compromised; that, too, is our new normal.

The challenge for us is how to adapt. Jews are civilization's oldest people and faith. For over 3,500 years we have experienced, endured, and overcome plagues and pogroms, wars and exile, and every other challenge known to humanity. And at the core of Judaism is an indomitable will and a clear-sighted wisdom; we know how to adjust, how to create, how to improvise and we do so because we refuse to give up. This spirit is engrained in our ancestral DNA and language. The Biblical Hebrew word for crisis is *mishbar*. It comes from the root *shavar*, "to break." A declension of this verb, *mashbeir*, describes the breach of the womb during childbirth. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it, "The Jewish reflex is to see difficult times as birth pains. Something new is being born."

What Sacks expressed, we have all felt. A crisis is not the time for despair. This is a time to respond, to rebuild, and to renew.

No, not just renew and rebuild what was. Rather, this is a time to build something newer and better.

The Jewish determination to create a better life is based on our deep-seated belief that each human life is precious, created *B'tzelem Elohim*, a part of God's sacred creation. That belief inspires a spirit that drives us to search for cures and solutions. It is an attitude that is not satisfied merely to survive a crisis, but also to learn and teach lessons from a crisis: lessons that will prepare future generations, helping them to overcome unforeseen challenges.

That indomitable spirit, that creative wit, and that tenacious drive to respond with positive determination is quite evident in the Jewish people and most specifically here in the Temple Sinai community.

As the full extent of the pandemic became evident, we immediately developed a slate of online programming to connect with people of all ages and backgrounds: from toddler and preschool virtual crafts, classes and song sessions to Hebrew and Jewish studies for our Religious School students. And we not only maintained our Adult educational offerings, we increased them!

Most inspiring of all are the attitudes and reactions of couples, families and individuals who had to move or drastically alter plans for wedding days, *B'nei Mitzvah* services, naming celebrations, and anniversaries. Large elaborate celebrations with hundreds of guests were adjusted to intimate, *heimesche* gatherings with a *chuppah* in a backyard or a front yard or on a deck. *B'nei Mitzvah* families who would have had family and guests in from all over the country filling this Zwerin Sanctuary or the Abrahams Family Chapel were downsized to a few dozen or less. Loved ones had to tune in via our LiveStream broadcasts or Facebook. And those that did show up had to spread out and keep their masks on.

And guess what? I did not hear even one word of moaning or “woe is me” from brides and grooms, or *B'nei Mitzvah* students or their families. In every single case, couples, families, students and friends expressed such gratitude; they felt lucky to have love, to have options, and to have a supportive community that did not lock the doors of the synagogue to them. The values, maturity, and positive attitudes displayed is proof that despite the dire predictions of doomsday *shriers*, the future is in very good hands indeed. Or as the Who sang: “The Kids are Alright!”

While it is one thing to put off or adjust for a celebration, funerals are another story altogether. When a loved one dies, the Jewish tradition of

gathering to honor the deceased and comfort the mourners has been proven to be essential to our psychological and emotional wellbeing. But indoor funeral services have been forbidden and even attending the cemetery service is limited. Likewise, the pandemic made it impossible to provide the comforting embrace of family and friends at *shiva*. Again, instead of despairing the situation or breaking down in disappointment, we created alternatives to meet the needs of the mourners and to honor the deceased.

After loss and disappointment, never doubt the miraculous regenerative powers of God's gift of life. I want to share with you the sweet story about the Methuselah Tree that has recently attracted international attention.

In 1963, an archaeologist who was excavating Herod's palace on the top of Masada found a clay jar that contained 2,000-year-old Judean date palm seeds. In the Torah, dates were among the seven species singled out for a special blessing. Wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranates, olive (oil), and date (honey) are mentioned in Deuteronomy (8:8) as symbolic of the blessings of the Land of Israel. The phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" was a reference to date honey, not honey from bees.

Dates were prized both for their delicious taste and for their acclaimed medicinal benefits. Because they could be enjoyed both fresh and dried, dates were invaluable as a trading commodity. Generations of our ancestors depended on the bounty of the date palm to survive and thrive.

Unfortunately, the date groves were decimated by wars. Invading armies chopped the trees down for their war machines and to starve the local economy. And that would have been the end of the story, but God's blessings and human ingenuity are miraculous partners. Six of the ancient date seed found on Masada sat on a shelf at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv for 40 years, all but forgotten. And then, Dr. Sarah Sallon of the Hadassah Medical Center and agricultural expert Elaine Solowey from the Arava Institute decided to see if the seeds could grow. They took some of the seeds, soaked them in hot water and then planted them in a nutrient rich mixture. In a few months one began to sprout. In a few years it had grown 6 ½ feet, so they planted it at Kibbutz Ketura where it flowered, (indicating that it was a male), destined to bear pollen but not fruit. They named the date tree Methuselah, after the Biblical personality who lived to the age of 969.



More of the ancient seeds were subsequently nurtured back to life and some were female. They were then pollinated by Methuselah and just a few months ago produced fruit. After nearly 2,000 years, the famous Judean Date, which had been feared extinct, lost forever, once again lives. Its delicious fruit will once again nurture and delight us.

The miraculous rebirth of the Methuselah tree is a metaphor for the rebuilding and regeneration of our world after this COVID-19 pandemic is finally over. The Psalmist sang, "*Tzaddik katamar yifrach*--The righteous will blossom forth as a date palm tree" (Psalms 92).

After a crisis there is rebirth. We celebrate the renewal of creation every morning at the beginning of our worship. We say in *Yotzeir Or* that the act of creation happens every day: *b'khol yom tamid ma'ase breisheet*. Every day is our opportunity to create a new and better "normal."

No one could have predicted the year we have just endured. Still, we have all learned invaluable lessons. Never again will we take for granted the pleasure of visiting with family and friends. Yes, we have learned that we can maintain communication and bonds through the internet. And we also have learned how much we miss and need each other.

Perhaps we'll be more willing to take the time from work and other responsibilities in order to attend a *simchah* or go visit a loved one. I hope that is the case. And I most certainly hope that we'll make it a priority to attend a *shiva* gathering . . . because we all know now more than ever before how the physical presence of friends and loved ones can help us after a loss.

And while we should continue to wash our hands diligently and stay away from others when we are suffering a cold, I do look forward to the time we can give each other hugs.

Yes, the unexpected will continue to happen. However, now we have a greater appreciation for relationships and experiences that transcend time and place.

As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." To which Stephen Hawking amended: "Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change."

Let's be smart. Until the pandemic is over, we'll continue to be safe, wear our masks, and keep a reasonable distance from one another. We'll be smart but we need not despair.

At the end of his life, Moses exhorted the Children of Israel and their future leaders with this essential message: *“Chizku v’imtzu, al tiru, Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be intimidated ...because Adonai your God is with you. God will not fail you. God will not forsake you.”*

Yes, we need to be strong and courageous. Yes, we need to learn the lessons from the past and adjust to whatever becomes the new normal.

And we also have to remember that life cannot be lived in fear. Rather, we best live life with love.