

**Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg's sermon for the first day of Rosh HaShanah, 5769 / 2008**

Shanah Tovah!

Those of you who have been here in the past for the High Holidays may have noticed that I like to connect all my High Holiday sermons for a given year with some common thread, to tie them together. And figuring out what the common theme would be for this year was not difficult.

A highlight in the lifetime of our congregation, and for me personally, was our congregational trip to Israel—26 of us spent 8 days experiencing the miracles of modern Israel—from its transcendent physical beauty, to its rich history that is intertwined with the history of the Jewish people, to the vibrant society that Israel is today.

Later on, on Yom Kippur, I plan to focus more directly on what I, and our group, learned on this trip to Israel. But until then, I plan to start each of my sermons on these High Holidays with a brief snapshot of something that our group saw or did in Israel—to communicate to you what our experience was like, and hopefully to show how every aspect of Jewish identity, history, values and tradition is ultimately connected in some way to the land of Israel.

And if these descriptions motivate you to visit Israel for yourselves, so much the better!

For this morning's snapshot, I invite you to go down. As far down below sea level as you can go on the surface of this earth. Amid all the historical sites that a visitor to Israel can see, there are also some simply outstanding **natural** wonders of the world in Israel—and one of these is the Dead Sea, known in Hebrew as Yam ha-Melach—the Salt Sea.

You may know that it's the lowest point on earth—1,378 feet below sea level. Visitors flock to the Dead Sea. Its salt content—9 times saltier than ocean water—makes everyone so buoyant that you can float even if you're not trying to. Actually, even if you're trying NOT to. And of course, the Dead Sea is also known for the famous Dead Sea Mud that some members of our group appreciated the opportunity, believe it or not, to spread on themselves, as well as the various Dead Sea cosmetics that are made from that mineral-rich mud.

But if you see the Dead Sea in the news today, it's probably not for any of those reasons. If the Dead Sea is in the news today, it's because it is shrinking—very quickly. Israel and Jordan have been making extensive use of water from the Yam Kinneret, the Sea of Galilee, which would otherwise flow into the Dead Sea—and now that flow from the Jordan River is not keeping pace with evaporation, and so the Dead Sea is shrinking and receding by one meter of depth per year. In fact, it's shrinking SO quickly that many Israeli maps have become quickly outdated. For many centuries, the Dead Sea had a particular distinctive shape: with a large upper basin, and a smaller lower basin, and a narrow part connecting the two. But now mapmakers are getting honest and noting that the lower basin basically no longer exists. They're drawing the Dead Sea on maps the way it actually IS now, not the way it used to be, the way we WISH it still were.

One participant in our trip, who has done some academic work on the environmental impact of the shrinkage of the Dead Sea and the various plans to re-irrigate it, soberly

reminded us that if the Dead Sea shrinks by 1 meter of depth each year, then the water that we were swimming in will not be there next year at this time.

For me, that was an image that was emblematic of this Jewish year that has now concluded—This year that has included many dramatic—and upsetting—examples That what we thought and believed to be stable and reliable is not necessarily so. Many of these challenged or discarded assumptions, like the Dead Sea, concern the environment. Many of us had, in earlier times, made the assumption that the glaciers and the permafrost in the Arctic are there permanently—after all, isn't that what permafrost means? (My colleague Rabbi Joshua Hammerman spent last summer in Alaska ... and he says that while they were there, he and his wife “spent an inordinate amount of time watching glaciers calving. As each enormous chunk of ice broke off and hit the water, the sound of a muffled explosion reached our ears a few seconds later. There is no sight on earth so magnificent—and so alarming—as these burning, radiant castles of ice— [seeing gorgeous Alaska]... melting away before our eyes.”

Many of our challenged or discarded assumptions concern the economy. Many of us had assumed that companies like Bear Stearns and Merrill Lynch, that have thrived for over 80 years, and Lehman Brothers, that thrived for well over 100 years, are like the bedrock of the American economy. Perhaps we assumed that these companies could be expected to be around forever; they absolutely couldn't fail. And perhaps we assumed that entities like AIG, Fannie Mae, Freddy Mac, Washington Mutual, were among the most stable and reliable parts of our economic system. Many of us may have made assumptions in the realm of personal finance—some of us may have made assumptions about our own job stability, or the job stability of our family members. Or made assumptions that increases in food prices, or in gas prices, were annoying, but they wouldn't really have any effect on our financial decisions. Or some of us may have made the assumption that buying a home is the best financial investment, that home values always rise, and never fall. Or perhaps they fall all around the country, but the New York area is different and they won't fall here. Or even if home values fall in the New York area, they won't fall in Manhattan or in Hoboken.

Then there are the international assumptions—perhaps we made the assumption that the United States, the winner of the Cold War, is the world's only superpower, will ALWAYS be financially and geopolitically and militarily dominant throughout the world. Or the assumption that Israel's strength ensures that a Jewish state is a permanent fixture on the map of the Middle East. And we add to this the fact that “change” is undoubtedly the word of the year as two presidential candidates BOTH try to seize the mantle of the outsider, the one who will make fundamental change in this country's direction. We're left with a changed landscape, with those *institutions and assumptions* we used to rely upon, that we thought were most stable, now displaying their precarious cracks.

If you thought I was going to SOLVE any of these problems today, I am sorry to disappoint you. Not my job. But, as a rabbi, what I CAN do is provide some guidance from Jewish tradition for navigating turbulent and uncertain times. With permission from one of my daughters, I want to share a story that I shared with the community a while ago when it happened. My daughter had just turned three, and her year in pre-school was ending. And we told her how there were various things that were going to change in her

schedule—that over the summer, she was going to go to camp instead of school, and then in the fall, she would be going to the same school but she would have different teachers, and she would be in a different classroom. And as she is sitting there, taking it all in, we asked her if she had any questions for us—and her question to us was, in all seriousness, “Are you still going to be my parents?” And she was visibly relieved to know that we had no plans of changing that. But it's not only kids who, at a time of tremendous transitions, have trouble sorting out what things are changeable and what things are permanent.

How do we endure with such severe challenges to our assumptions about how the world operates? Does Jewish tradition give us any guidance in determining what is stable and what changes? The first bit of guidance is that change is natural and expected—and desirable. The name of this holiday, Rosh haShanah, of course includes the Hebrew word for ‘year,’ which is Shanah. Shanah is a peculiar word in that it has a bivalent meaning. On the one hand, it appears to come from the Hebrew root meaning “change.” And of course, the new Hebrew year is an opportunity for things to change. But at the same time, Shanah comes from the root meaning “repeat.” That's the question we ask at the beginning of any new year: how much repetition, how much change. When we stop changing, we stop growing. but when EVERYTHING is changing around us, at an accelerating rate, we feel lost, unmoored, longing for something to hold fast to.

A second bit of wisdom is that even the crises in our lives sometimes, in retrospect, get reinterpreted as moments of great blessing. The classic biblical example of this is Joseph. You may remember that one day his father asks him to check up on his other brothers. Except that Joseph can't find them—and a stranger approaches him and says, *mah tevakesh?*—what are you looking for? Joseph responds: “I'm looking for my brothers. Have you seen them?” The man says, “Yes, I heard them saying they were going to the city of Dotan.” So Joseph finds them at Dotan—and that's where they throw him in a pit, then sell him into slavery, then tell their father that he has been eaten by a wild animal.

A contemporary midrash imagines Joseph, carried off to slavery, wishing he had never bumped into that helpful stranger And never found his brothers that day. Until Joseph becomes the manager of Potiphar's household—an exalted position in Egypt—and begins to be very thankful that he ran into that stranger, Starting the chain of events leading him to such an important position.

But then Joseph is thrown in jail—and again he curses the stranger for getting him into this mess. And when Joseph gets out of jail and becomes second in command to Pharaoh—by this time, he no longer curses the stranger or blesses him, but says, “It is still too soon for me to understand what that episode means in my life.” (Peter Pitzele, *Our Fathers' Wells*) In a perfect illustration of Kierkegaard's famous words: “Life is lived forwards, But it is understood backwards.” Whatever interpretations we want to give to recent events in our lives are probably too soon.

Anthropologists have noticed that diverse societies around the world have similar methods of dealing with moments of change and uncertainty—moments when one reality has concluded but another reality has not yet begun—moments that feel like one has left one room but not fully entered the next room. These moments are described as ‘liminal’ moments—which literally means ‘doorway’ moments—times when we have discarded

the first set of assumptions under which we have operated but have not fully developed a new set of assumptions.

Jewish tradition knows this tension well. - As Jewish history has its share of challenging liminal moments. One of the earliest rabbis, Simon the Just, Shimon Hatzadik, also lived at a time of great transition. at the time when Israel was conquered by the empire of Alexander the Great. And Jewish tradition was beginning to be threatened by Hellenistic culture. In the face of the crumbling of so many of the support pillars for Jewish society and way of life, Simon the Just asked: "What are the stable and enduring pillars upon which the world GENUINELY stands?" and in an opening passage of Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, he responded: "*al shloshah devarim ha-olam omed*—on 3 things the world stands—*al hatorah, ve-al ha-avodah, ve-al gemilut hasadmim*—the world stands on torah, divine service, and acts of loving kindness." It's a simple enough sentiment—that we actually teach this passage as a song to our kindergartners and first graders.

But it is also wisdom to help us today. The first of these support pillars, at a time when so much else is crumbling, is "Torah"—whether we understand narrowly as the five books of Moses, or more broadly as all of Jewish traditional writings, or most broadly as "traditional wisdom." In a fast-paced world where technology is rendered out-of-date almost as soon as it hits the shelves, where we are always looking for what is new and current, we may forget the value of investigating truths and wisdom that people have treasured for thousands of years. Not that the Torah is not often challenging to us—sometimes we see things in the Torah and all we can do is say, "This book was written thousands of years ago—and sometimes you can tell!" But at other times, if we approach it with an open heart, we see things written in the Torah that are exactly the wisdom we need at a contemporary time of challenge. For example, let us remember the various traditional Jewish teachings that, frankly, if everyone had put these into practice, could truly have avoided the current financial crisis. We could start with the commandment in Leviticus, *lifnei iver lo titen michshol*—(Leviticus 19) don't place a stumbling-block before the blind; don't take advantage of someone's ignorance. Or—as I shared with the congregation last week—The intuitive and direct admonishment of the Shulhan Aruch that it's unethical and unfair to make a loan to someone when you know that there is no way that they will be able to pay off the debt on the assigned schedule. (SA Hoshen Mishpat 97:4) Especially at challenging times, it makes sense to investigate wisdom that is around for the long haul.

The second of the support pillars of Simon the Just Is "avodah"—divine service, most literally. Simon the Just was referring to the service of God that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. But we can understand this word more broadly as referring to "ritual" in general. One of the most important purposes of ritual is to give life a mooring, a context, at a time of uncertainty. Those liminal moments when we are on the cusp between two different stages of being—whether we are going from one year to another, or from childhood to adulthood, or from life to death—these are usually the moments which we mark through rituals. Rituals help us to connect to each other, to affirm the various strands in our identities, And to mark our stability at times that are unstable.

And Simon the Just's third pillar is Gemilut Hasadim—acts of loving kindness—acts of generosity and community. It's when we bind ourselves to others That we remember to take note of so much that we have that is so much more important than our possessions—

the relationships we cultivate, the knowledge we acquire, the deeds of kindness and generosity that we perform for others. These are actually much more stable aspects of our lives than our possessions are.

And whereas this current financial crisis is very different from the various tribulations that have been endured for centuries—you can be sure that there is one important similarity: that this Jewish community and other Jewish communities around the world will be helping to care for those in difficult straits—whether, most immediately, through reduced membership and tuition waivers for our educational activities, or social services and networking assistance for those looking for jobs, or direct financial assistance where necessary.

This has been one of the most obvious responses in any Jewish community as well as one of the ways to invest life with meaning at a time of difficulty. And in light of recent events, I am reminded of a story told by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis about a friend of hers who grew up in a very wealthy and generous Jewish family in the Midwest, during the '20s and '30's. During the 1920's, his father gave very generously to charity -- making a gift of \$75,000 to one charitable organization.. And then in 1929, the family lost absolutely everything in the stock market crash. And as a teenager, during the '30's, Rebbetzin Jungreis's friend asked his father, "Dad, can you imagine how great it would be if you still had that \$75,000 that you contributed to charity in the past?" And his father looked at him, sternly, and said, "Son, I'm going to tell you something now, and never forget it. The only money that I DO have now is those \$75,000 that I gave away. And especially now, my only regret is that I didn't give away more."

Many people today are not really sure what the word "community" means. I know this because the 100 million online users of Facebook are sometimes described in news reports as a "community." That's different from what WE in this congregation mean when we talk about community: people who will come to your aid whether they know you or not—and visit you, comfort you at a time of mourning, provide transportation for you to doctor's appointments—simply because they feel connected to you. Two new initiatives in our congregation this year will help us strengthen these bonds of community—our My Jewish Neighborhood project to coordinate Jewish ritual gatherings in our members' homes, and our Hesed committee—named after our beloved member and friend Sarah Condiotti of blessed memory—to help us better serve the needs of those in times of crisis.

Torah and wisdom—divine service and ritual—acts of loving kindness and generosity and community. When instability threatens, these are our constants. Just as anthropologists note that in cultures around the world, these are typical responses to liminal moments. Of course, the synagogue is not the ONLY place where one can access these points of stability. But in truth, where CAN you find a commitment to ancient wisdom, coupled with ritual to ease people through times of transition, combined with an authentic sense of community, encouraging acts of kindness? This is a combination of activities that truthfully, you can find primarily in religious communities like this one.

You have probably noticed that the color scheme for the High Holidays is—white. The ark cover is white, the table covers here are white, and the torah covers are white, And I—and many others here—are wearing these white robes called kittels. Why white?

Because it signifies a clean slate and a new beginning. but there's an additional special resonance to this type of plain white linen garment. it's very similar to a traditional Jewish burial shroud. It reminds us these are entire days dedicated to confronting our mortality—remembering that we are not here forever—reminding ourselves that there's an urgency to the life decisions we have to make at this time of year.

Now, this idea may sound a bit morbid to you. And you're not the only one. The eminent author Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote recently that while he understands that this is the time-honored explanation for the use of the kittel—this explanation has never resonated with him. it seems too depressing, too stark to be truly useful. Ask Rabbi Kushner why he wears a kittel on the High Holidays, and he uses a different metaphor. It's not a shroud; rather, it's a chrysalis. (and I just want to acknowledge Meg, our pre-school science teacher, who is the one who helped me to understand the difference between a cocoon and a chrysalis.)

A caterpillar creates a chrysalis around itself, secluding itself temporarily from the outside world, to permit itself to change—and to protect itself when it changes. And that is our task over these next 10 days. Each of us individually has a lot to change, but we may not even know where to begin, which direction to change IN, what should change, and what should remain the same. so we seclude ourselves—we withdraw from the world—first, by coming to the synagogue—but then withdrawing further—secluding ourselves within our tallitot and kittels—spending some moments of solitude to figure out how we are going to change.

One more Jewish response to change comes from Rav Kook—the first chief rabbi of the Jewish community of Palestine in the pre-state era, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rav Kook lived at another liminal moment in Jewish history—as Jews were confronted by the challenges of modernity, combined with a resurgent anti-Semitism in Europe, and severe tensions between the religious and secular Jewish communities in Palestine in their effort to re-establish a Jewish homeland.

One of Rav Kook's favorite phrases was a pun in Hebrew—*ha-yashan yit'hadash, ve-hachadash yitkadash*. Which means: the ancient will be renewed, and the new- will be sanctified. At a time when some Jews were willing to dismiss all of Jewish tradition as old and outdated, he said, *ha-yashan yit'hadash*—the ancient will be renewed. As time goes on, at this time of transition, we will see just how relevant the ancient wisdom of the Jewish people continues to be in the modern world. And to those religious Jews who were fearful of all innovation, he would say, *ha-chadash yitkadash*. That which is new will be made holy.

May our new year balance the new and the ancient, stability and change, prosperity, and sensitivity for those who are not prospering, renewal of the ancient and sanctification of what is renewed.

Shanah Tovah!!