

## “Renew Our Days as of Old”

**Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg’s sermon for the First Day of Rosh HaShanah 2007:**

*(Each of Rabbi Scheinberg’s High Holiday sermons this year began with the communal singing of a short Hebrew song that formed the basis for the sermon.)*

*Hashiveinu adonai elecha ve-nashuvah,  
Hadesh yameinu ke-kedem.*

Return to us, Adonai, and we shall return; renew our days as of old.

Some of you probably remember the TV show *Dallas*. I only watched the show once, for about 10 minutes, but it was a very memorable 10 minutes, and if you were alive and conscious in 1986, you probably remember hearing about it. The story actually began the previous year, when the actor that played Bobby Ewing on the show, Patrick Duffy, had decided that he wanted to leave the show. The writers decided that his character would die. The following year, however, the ratings for the show just plummeted. It’s never a good idea to kill off one of the most popular characters in a long-running TV show. And Patrick Duffy started to have second thoughts about leaving the show. So the producers invited him back on. And what’s the plot device that they ended up using to incorporate him back into the series? The entire 1985-1986 season of *Dallas* didn’t happen. It was an extended dream sequence that lasted for an entire year. Even children knew that we had just seen one of the biggest cop-outs in American television history.

I am telling you this not only to engage in some 80’s nostalgia with you, but also because I want to explain a particular verse from the Bible. It’s a verse we just sang as we were putting the torah scrolls away, and in fact, we sing it with all our gusto every Shabbat, as we’re putting the torah scrolls away and closing the ark:

*Hashiveinu adonai elecha ve-nashuvah, Hadesh yameinu ke-kedem.*

Return to us, Adonai, and we shall return; renew our days as of old.

But you can’t really begin to understand this verse until you know its context in the Bible. It’s from the end of the saddest book of the Bible, the book of Eicha, or Lamentations. Our community read this book seven weeks ago as part of our commemoration of the fast day of Tisha B’Av, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. It’s a series of poems describing how the Jewish people were conquered by a cruel empire who besieged our cities, destroyed our holy places, killed and exiled thousands of inhabitants, and took away our freedom. And then the climax of the book: “Return to us, God, and we’ll return to you; renew our days as of old.” NOW you see the poignancy of this verse. Terrible things, unbearable things, have happened to us. But we remember a time when things were better. God, turn back the clock—or let us awake from this terrible dream.

Renew our days as of old. Renew our days as they were before.

But there are two problems with this verse. The first problem is that it’s a logical paradox. “Renew our days as they were before.” If our days are to be RENEWED, they will be NEW, and not as they were before. And if they are as they were before, they will not be RENEWED! In this verse we want to have it both ways. What a fitting end to the book of Lamentations—a lament in the form of a dream that we all know, in our rational moments, is paradoxical and impossible. We want our future to be our past.

But the second flaw in this verse is more serious: It’s a psychological flaw. This is everyone’s fantasy at a time of crisis: Make things the way they used to be. You’ve probably prayed that prayer before; I know I have. “Just help me rebuild this friendship, this relationship, to the way it was before.” Or, “Just help me remember something that I used to remember before.” Or, “Let me be the way I used to be before.” Or, “Just let me, or my loved one, get healthy again, the way we were before.” We often have an idealized picture of perfection in the past and we fantasize about turning back the clock to attain that perfection again, in the future. The problem is, it usually doesn’t work that way.

TV personality Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, whom we were privileged to host at our synagogue several years ago, tells the story that his parents divorced when he was eight years old. Five years later, his father asked him what gift he would want for his bar mitzvah. And he responded immediately: “The one and only thing that I want—the ONLY thing that will make me happy—is for you and mom to get married again.” Rabbi

Boteach writes that it took another four years after that for him to finally understand that it wasn't going to happen. This story, and these prayers, are poignant but childlike, because it almost never happens that you can succeed in turning back the clock.

Starting a year ago in the summer, I was privileged to represent New Jersey's religious communities on the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission. As I have told this community before, in addition to a tremendous honor, it's one of the most difficult things I have ever done. Among other issues, we spent a lot of time confronting the claim of some supporters of the death penalty that the death penalty is psychologically necessary for the families of murder victims, because it helps them to achieve "closure." It helps them get back to normal. And that process of 'closure' is impeded when the murderer is still alive.

The problem is, the experts in the field of bereavement counseling say that 'closure' doesn't really happen. Certainly execution doesn't return things to normal.

In fact, getting 'back to normal' is overrated. The term that those counselors prefer to use is "the new normal."

Perhaps like many of you, each year on Rosh HaShanah I have flashbacks to that Rosh haShanah of six years ago, when many of us gathered here in September of 2001, and reflected together at how much seemed to have changed about our lives and our future in the span of just two weeks. And whereas we may periodically feel like we're getting back to normal, all it takes is a new terror alert, or the experience of putting our shoes on the airport conveyor belt, or having our toothpaste confiscated, or thinking about how we're involved in a war that's already longer than World War II and it isn't going particularly well, to remind us that we liked the 'old normal' a whole lot more than the 'new normal.'

So is that what *hadesh yameinu ke-kedem* is all about? Is this line, which we say every time we put away the torah, just an unattainable dream? Just an indulgence of impossible childhood fantasies of the world set right?

I have to give the sages of our tradition more credit than that. There are two interpretations of this verse that can help us to live more deliberately and more meaningfully in the coming year.

One way to understand this verse is that sometimes we CAN renew our days specifically by going back to what was before. Even if it will never be exactly what it was before, in many areas of our life, what we have to do is PRECISELY

to derive inspiration for our future – from looking to the past. In no area is this more true than in our world's ecological crisis.

Whereas I have been vaguely aware of our planet's ecological crisis for much of my life, and at times have even been an environmental activist, I entered a period of latency on this issue from which I am only emerging now.

We are gradually learning uncomfortable truth that, while we assumed for so long that technology was making our lives better and helping us to advance, in fact, much of what we assumed was advancement was actually regression.

We thought, for example, that disposable plates, cutlery, cups, and shopping bags were an advance over the inconvenience of washing lots of dishes, and carrying your stuff with you. We didn't realize that almost every single one of these disposables will live happily ever after, intact, in a landfill, for decades, if not centuries, to come.

We thought that automobile travel was an advance, and air travel even more so, making the world smaller, strengthening personal and commercial relationships. Many of us grew up thinking of public transportation as something you strive to not be dependent upon, because a car is a symbol of the freedom to come and go as you please, without relying upon someone else's schedule. We knew we would create fumes, in the process of making the world smaller, but we thought they would just dissipate—but they don't dissipate.

We thought that it was an advance to be able to go to the store and get great strawberries in the middle of the winter, and to get great bananas year-round even though we're nowhere near where they grow. Author

Barbara Kingsolver points out that the average food item in our supermarkets has traveled further than most of us would typically go on vacation.

For many of us, we thought that putting clothes out to dry on the clothesline was something our parents or grandparents had to do when they were younger, that we are glad to be liberated from. (Actually, what spurred me to connect the environment with the verse *hadesh yameinu ke-kedem* was that, a few weeks ago, I noticed that some of our neighbors right near the synagogue were hanging out their laundry to dry. My first thought was, “How quaint!” Not long ago, everyone in Hoboken was probably doing that.

And then I thought: considering that the clothes dryer is one of the most energy-hungry and carbon-hungry appliances in a home, pretty soon, most of us may be doing it again.

We are just starting to sit up and take notice to what environmental scientists and philosophers have been saying for decades: almost every single technological innovation that was developed to make our lives simpler and more enjoyable has the side effect of increasing carbon emissions and ultimately making our earth more perilous and less sustainable. All these technological innovations are here to stay—we can't imagine life without them. But we're going to have to use them more judiciously, deriving some inspiration from the past, if we want a renewed and renewable future.

Now some of you are thinking, if I wanted to hear a sermon about the environment, I'd go listen to Al Gore. Why doesn't the rabbi just talk about **Judaism** like he's supposed to? Well, actually, I AM talking about Judaism.

Jewish tradition **already** counsels us to be very deliberate and thoughtful about how we consume. That's what the laws of Kashrut are about: there are ethical implications to the decisions we make about what we consume, and how, and when, and how much.

And Jewish tradition **already** counsels us to be very deliberate and thoughtful with our energy usage. That's one message of the laws of Shabbat in Judaism: it's a day to tread lightly in the world, conscious of the destructive power that we wield merely by going about our days' activities.

And Jewish tradition **already** counsels us that whatever we have is getting passed to children yet unborn, and we have a responsibility not to leave them with a mess to clean up because of our own indulgences. You know the story from the Talmud of the old man who planted a carob tree even though he wouldn't survive to see it bear fruit, because just as his ancestors planted carob trees for him, he was going to plant carob trees for his descendants.

Now the truth is, I can talk the talk but I am still learning to walk the walk.

Have I truly made the lifestyle changes that are consonant with what the current ecological situation demands of us, and that Jewish tradition demands of us? While on the one hand, I take delight in all the easy things I am doing, like switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs, and living somewhere with excellent public transportation, there's obviously so much more I could be doing: even just the easy things, like bringing my own shopping bags with me to the supermarket or unplugging all the phone chargers and computer battery chargers when they're not in use—which I'm pledging (publicly!) to do during the coming year.

You've probably read about what things you can do to reduce your carbon footprint and to tread more lightly in the world. We are fond of the metaphor that the mitzvot, the commandments of the torah, are like a ladder, because you have to climb one rung at a time. We are each at a different rung on the ladder in terms of our environmental consciousness, but we can each climb up one rung during the coming year.

It's one way for our days and the days of our planet to be renewed, as in the past.

(And, to assist you in climbing up the next rung of the ladder, we are thankful to have a synagogue committee devoted to exploring the environment and Jewish life, and to helping the synagogue as an institution, as well as its members, make decisions that are maximally ecologically responsible.)

But that's not the only meaning of *hadesh yameinu ke-kedem* for us. One of the earliest commentaries on this passage, the midrashic collection called *Eicha Rabbah*, asks the question: When the verse says “make

our days as 'before,'” what does “before” mean? “Before” what? And it answers the question in a typical rabbinic fashion. If you want to learn what the word ‘ke-kedem’ (‘before,’ or ‘of old’) means in the book of Lamentations, go and find other examples of that word in other parts of the Bible. Sure enough, you can find the word *kedem* in the beginning of the book of Genesis, in a passage about the Garden of Eden. For this reason, *Eicha Rabbah* tells us, *hadesh yameinu ke-kedem* really means ‘Make our days like the Garden of Eden.’

At first glance, this interpretation has that same psychological problem we’ve been talking about—it’s a wish that is unattainable. The first time I read this, I got so frustrated with this commentary. And then, fortunately, I decided to read more carefully. Because the verse that *Eicha Rabbah* quotes, from the book of Genesis, is actually the following: *Va-yashken mi-kedem le-gan eden et hak’ruvim ve-et lahat ha-cherev ha-mit’ha-pechet*. “And God stationed angels, and a flaming sword, at the eastern entrance of the Garden of Eden.” (The word *kedem* can also mean *east*.)

This is not a reference to how wonderful it was in the Garden of Eden. This is a reference to what happened after Adam and Eve were EXPELLED from the garden, and God set up the angels and the sword to make sure they wouldn’t sneak back in!

What a radical re-reading of this verse. We **aren’t** saying, “renew our lives as **our lives were** before.” Rather we are saying, “Renew our lives, as **you have renewed our lives** before.” And more specifically: “Help us to rebuild after a time of difficulty, challenge and dislocation, just as you have helped us to rebuild after such difficulties, challenges and dislocations in the past.”

That such rebuilding is, in fact, possible is a lesson that I have learned best from so many of you, because it’s you who have taught me of just how resilient we are, how strong is our capacity to create a ‘new normal,’ to begin again.

I think, for example, of how many of you assisted in rebuilding our Jewish community when it had essentially been left for dead by all the national and regional Jewish organizations.

I think of people who have managed to turn layoffs into opportunities to switch to careers that they find ultimately more satisfying and even accomplish more social good.

I think of people who have turned illnesses into chances to reevaluate life goals and priorities.

And I think of people who have experienced that very special miracle of falling in love, losing that love, whether to death or to other circumstances, and managing to fall in love again.

And truly we can look at the State of Israel, celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, as the Jewish people’s collective triumphant response to 2,000 years of homelessness and adversity.

Just one more story: I had the opportunity to visit New Orleans in the winter of 2006, together with a group of young adults from the American Jewish Committee, for whom I led a couple of educational sessions on Jewish responses to tragedy and the Jewish imperative for social justice. One of our tasks was to assist with people rebuilding their homes in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans, the already impoverished section of the city that was most horrifically devastated by Hurricane Katrina. On an eerily silent block of modest one-story houses, our group was assigned to work on the one and only house with a brick exterior, which was also—not coincidentally—the one and only house on the block which didn’t look as if it were just going to collapse on top of us. Our task was to remove everything from the house and gut it completely, so that it could be rebuilt, at least in theory—should they hypothetically get permission and funding to rebuild.

Walking into the house, wearing protective gear and masks to protect us from the toxic mold, we saw what a person’s possessions look like when they are left to marinate in flood waters for six months. Walls and furniture disintegrated at our touch. We made a huge pile of debris at the curb. We were told that if we found anything that could be remotely salvageable, we should put it in the hatchback of the rusty car in the driveway, a car that would obviously never be driven again. Quickly, though, we realized that there was nothing salvageable at all. Until I pulled out one drawer which had some books and papers in it—the pages were all fused together in a pulpy mass, except for two smaller masses of paper, one of which was labeled

**Rabbi Scheinberg's sermon — First Day of Rosh HaShanah, 2007**

“deed” and the other of which was labeled “mortgage.” I was simply fortunate that I hadn’t just torn those documents in half. We placed them in the back of the car. After a few hours, the owners of the house arrived and were full of gratitude, though they were equally excited about some photos and a Bible that we were able to salvage. Who knows if this couple, whose family had lived in the house for 2 generations, will be able to rebuild. But sometimes we are shown a symbol that rebuilding is possible—that we have the capacity, even at a time of destruction, to begin again.

Elie Wiesel commented on the story of Adam and Eve: “God gave Adam a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.” Dear God, **הַדָּשׁ מִיְמֵנו כְּקֶדֶם**—as we begin a new year, renew our lives as of old; may our past guide us as we establish a renewed future, and may we have the courage to begin again.

(Sing Hashiveinu)