

SERMON: EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5781**Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, South Burlington, Vermont****THE BLESSING OF BEING MORTAL**

Tonight, on this eve of our New Year, I'm not going to deliver a formal sermon in robes. Without any of you here listening, in this year of pandemic, it just doesn't seem fitting, and anyway, that sort of formality just doesn't work very well on ZOOM. Instead of making us feel the grandeur and gravity of the day, formal robes on a bimah on a screen in a room where you aren't with me only highlights the distance and separation, and I want to feel as connected as is possible through this medium.

So instead, let me start by saying "L'Shanah Tova," "Happy New Year." May it be better than the last and may it bring us hope and connection in place of distance and despair.

Rosh Hashanah literally means 'head of the year.' Now why would "new year" be called "head of the year"? Because when we are born into this world, most of us come out headfirst. Anyone who has been present at the birth of a healthy baby can tell you the sheer awe and wonder they felt at witnessing a new life. It is astounding really, that something can come alive, can go from inanimate to animate. Just stop and reflect on that for a moment, on that mystery. If you've been present at such a moment, try to remember how it felt, I mean besides the pain.

Such a simple, yet astounding thing, a new life and how it is so perfect in itself, and yet at the same time is connected to something larger: the chain of human families going back and forward; the experience of consciousness, or maybe to a connection to God who is consciousness.

Maybe it's the hormones, or the medicine, or the lack of sleep, or sheer exhaustion at the end of labor, but almost everyone talks about that moment as being transcendent, both rooted in the moment and connected to something larger, enduring through time.

I also know that those of us have been with people at the end of their lives have also experienced a transcendent moment within the loss and pain and sadness. Of course, all deaths are different, and some are peaceful in sleep and some happen amidst paramedics and machines, and some are long suffering, but if we are lucky, and open, and can still our fears, we can experience a sense of connection and love that needs no words for in a moment, more is spoken without words than ever with them. There is that sense of connection to something larger than any of us, a connection to the gift that is just being alive together, even if – especially if – it is one of the last living moments we will share. In death, there is sometimes a moment of profound love of life and a sense that love is so much greater than what we can express in our day to day lives, greater than what we normally allow ourselves to feel.

Those moments are sacred, holy to us.

They remind us of the fine line between being alive and not being alive.

They remind us we are mortal, and that we live our entire lives close to that fine line, that unfathomable chasm, between here and not here.

This year, a pandemic has reminded of that fine line, of just how mortal we are, how close we all live to the knife-edge of chance between living and dying. It can be scary and anxiety provoking how fragile we are. But of course, it is only scary because we manage to live so much of our lives without thinking about that, happily in a well-constructed delusion that we are permanent, that those we love are, that our happiness is.

But we know it's not, and that all things change, and that we are mortal. We have known it all along. Knowing we are here only for a short time is among the most powerful aspects of being human. It defines the human condition. It makes moments meaningful.

Awareness of mortality can terrify us, cripple us, lead us to a fear of living. But it doesn't have to do that to us. And while we don't have control over being mortal, or over when and how we die, we do have some control over how we respond and react to our mortality when it is held up to us as a mirror.

We can choose to risk, for time is short.
We can risk living more fully.
We can risk loving more deeply.
We can risk doing the thing we love now instead of putting it off.
We can risk stepping into a more spiritual life.
We can risk thanking God and meaning it.
We can risk going ahead and being the person we plan to be.

Now, I know many Jewish people that are turned off by the High Holy Day liturgy, that don't like that the '*who will live, and who will die, who by fire and who by plague*' stuff, and I get that. I don't think many of us actually believe that God decides who will die and how every Rosh Hashanah and that we're here to beg for another year.

But we are here to ask. With humility. And awareness of the preciousness of being alive. For life. We may not believe God decides when and how we die, but we surely know that we don't decide it. This year might be our last, because that is true every year and every day of our lives. It is the truth of being gifted with life, and with consciousness. And that is one of the purposes of these days – to remind us of that gift, that we are mortal, we don't forever to get things right, and as the psalm says, we can't take our riches with us when we go.

The High Holy Days ask to be humble, to kneel in the face of something greater, more enduring, to face our mortality so that we might truly choose life and blessing.

The High Holy Days remind us to put some attention to what David Brook's calls our "eulogy virtues" instead of our "resume virtues."

The High Holy Days is a wake-up call, symbolized most clearly by the Shofar, to live fully, get right with one another, and get right with God.

On the High Holy Days, God comes in the form of Mary Oliver to ask us, "Who made the world? And What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (*The Summer Day*)

You know, science agrees that is an extraordinary set of coincidences that allow us to be here on ZOOM. Indeed, it is truly astounding that there is something here in this universe instead of nothing at all. If there had not been the tiniest of unevenness, little lumps, little matzoh balls in the primordial chicken soup of the big bang, there wouldn't be matter, and that matter somehow coalesced into stars, shone, exploded, coalesced again and again to make the stuff of these bodies and this earth is, well, at least highly unlikely, astronomically unlikely.

And that this little blue planet by this nondescript star happened to be not too close and not too far, with lots of water, and a giant moon that slowed our roll to a reasonable speed, that washed giant tides across the surface to mix-up the stuff of life, and that it was all stable enough for long enough for us to evolve, and come in to this earth with our eyes wide, our ears listening for language, and a sense of radical amazement in our spirits, that makes these mortal lives a miracle and here we are, in this crazy time, with a pandemic, with protests, with polarization, with forests burning and oceans rising, and we get to witness it all, to be here, alive with people we love. How is that possible? Rosh Hashanah asks us, and answers back, "this is a day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Rosh HaShanah in our tradition is the birthday of the world, the day celebrate creation. Abraham Joshua Heschel said that the religious person looks at this world, and seeing something instead of nothing, is filled with such gratitude at being alive to witness all this that we are moved to a sense of duty to serve one another, serve life, serve God by stewarding this creation. A religious person, he said, should be one " whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair." It is an ethic of wonderment at life.

Let us try to look at this world the way that newborn, that toddler look at the world: amazed, full of wonder and delight at the smallest thing.

Let's look at this world the way the first human did in Genesis, after inanimate clay became living, after God gave the breath of life, the *neshama*, and sitting on the river bank from this first ancestor was sculpted, looked up at the world wonder and delight, naming each creature that God brought forth to show her.

Let us be better to ourselves and each other. Let us understand the limits, and therefore the profundity of these human mortal lives.

But most of all, let us delight in one another who happen to be here together in this little community for just a short time. Let us hold one another close, even at a distance, even with masks.

Teshuvah is not about feeling terrible; it is about loving your life and your friends enough to want to do better. It is the duty of being alive and conscious.

God again speaks in the voice of Mary Oliver:

You do not have to be good tells us.

You do not have to walk on your knees

For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.*

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

*Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.*

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

May we each find our place in the family of things.

May we each return to that sense of wonder at just being, for this moment, alive.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon