*“These are the times that try men’s souls.”*

In a frigid December of 1776, only a few months after the Continental Congress had declared that the American colonies would henceforth be independent states, British forces were advancing on the undertrained and undersupplied militias charged with defending this newfound liberty. Thomas Paine, the philosopher-patriot of the Revolution, wrote an essay to be read aloud to the Continental Army stationed in Pennsylvania three days before they crossed the Delaware river in a daring surprise attack. In his essay, Paine reflected the anxiety of an infant nation in the metaphor of a trial: “These are the times that try men’s souls.”

The defendants in this trial are our souls. And the judiciary is not physical, but temporal. Our souls stand trial in a courtroom made not of marble, but made of moments.

If Thomas Paine had been inclined to write in Hebrew, he might have written

וּנְתַנֶּה תֹּקֶף קְדֻשַּׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאָיוֹם

*We must acknowledge the distinctive power of this day, for it is awesome and frightening.*

אֱמֶת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דַיָּן וּמוֹכִיחַ וְיוֹדֵעַ וָעֵד

*Truly, You are the one who judges, proves, knows, bears witness.*

We are judged in moments. We are judged *by* moments.

Thomas Paine’s pamphlet, intended like the Shofar to both rouse the dormant from their apathy and to remind activists of the holy purpose of their activism, was called “The American Crisis”. This Rosh HaShana we are experiencing another American crisis, as resistance to tyranny has again become the order of the day for patriots who cherish liberty.

This is a moment of judgment.

We are the undertrained, underequipped, inexperienced militia shivering in the cold, listening to the words of Thomas Paine being read aloud by General Washington at the banks of the Delaware river, as we prepare to cross it and engage the Hessian forces in Trenton. And we are the undertrained, underequipped, inexperienced militia sweating in the desert heat, listening to the words of Moses being read aloud by General Joshua at the banks of the Jordan river, as we prepare to cross it and engage the Canaanite forces in Jericho.

King George III and Pharaoh Rameses are absent from the battlefield but present in our imagination, animating our hearts and orienting our souls away from tyranny and toward liberty.

This is Rosh HaShana, a moment of judgment and a moment of *T’shuvah*, a moment of return. We return to a desert encampment, three-and-a-half millennia ago. We return to a frigid December in Pennsylvania.

In this season, at this moment, we acknowledge that without freedom, there is no *T’shuvah*. And without *T’shuvah*, there is no freedom. The American national political project and the Hebraic national spiritual project are not only complimentary, but inextricable.

How is it that “without *T’shuvah*, there is no freedom”? From time to time, new rulers have arisen with no memory of the history which led to their situation – an Egyptian pharaoh with no memory of Joseph, an English king with no memory of the Magna Carta, and an American president with no memory of the Civil War. With no memory of history, they have no context for their power and therefore concern themselves *only* with their power. In their amnesia, they lose their capacity for *T’shuvah*, lose their capacity for humility, for introspection, and for change. When these despots speak, they offer only words of self-aggrandizement, and then words of anger and vengeance against threats both real and perceived. “Throw their children into the Nile!” “Tax their tea!” “Lock her up!” When in the course of human events, a ruler’s heart becomes hardened and loses capacity for *T’shuvah*, the first casualty is freedom. Without *T’shuvah*, freedom gives way to tyranny.

Shivering on the banks of the Delaware river, we hear the general’s recitation of Thomas Paine’s words reminding us of the sacred nature of our mission:

*“Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to TAX) but ‘to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER’ and if being bound in that manner is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.”*

The impiety of the tyrant on the throne in England offends us, and terrifies us. The impiety of the tyrant in the Oval Office in Washington offends us, and terrifies us. And to clarify, the impiety that terrifies us is not his lack of sincere faith in God or failure of religious practice, but something much more basic – an understanding of human frailty and fallibility. What terrifies us is a ruler who does not see himself as

יְסוֹדוֹ מֵעָפָר, וְסוֹפוֹ לֶעָפָר

*One whose origin is from dust and whose destiny is back to dust, who is comparable to a broken shard, a withering blade of grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, a scattering of dust, or a fleeting dream.*

The President of the United States is from dust, and he will return to dust. So when he fails to recognize that he is כְּחֶרֶס הַנִּשְׁבָּר like a broken shard, he issues poorly-written executive orders, and woe to us all. When he fails to understand that he is כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר like a passing shade, he tweets impulsive military threats to nuclear-armed nations, and woe to us all. When he fails to internalize that he is כַחֲלוֹם יָעוּף like a fleeting dream, he hardens his heart and closes his mind to evidence about electoral results, about science, about anything that contradicts the fleeting dream he enjoys of his own divinity, and woe to us all.

We are living through a new American crisis. We are in a moment of judgment, in the times that try our souls. We must acknowledge the distinctive power of this day. It *is* awesome. It *is* frightening. We are shivering on the banks of the Delaware river, listening to our general’s recitation of Thomas Paine:

*“The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”*

Are we sunshine patriots? Summer soldiers? To be frank, many of us aren’t all that comfortable being *any* sort of “soldier” or “patriot”.

We know how to be wanderers. We know how to be refugees. We know how to pack light and how to look over our shoulders. We know how to cross deserts and how to cross oceans, but crossing rivers is another matter. We know how to be teachers, how to be tradesworkers, how to be all manners of professions, but being soldiers is a less familiar role.

And while we’ve become accustomed to embracing and internalizing the mythology of the Exodus after so many years of annual repetition, so many years of intentionally imagining ourselves as if we personally escaped from Egypt, our embrace of the mythology of the American Revolution is more tentative and distant.

Yet this Rosh HaShana, in this moment of judgment, we are called to be soldiers and patriots. We are called to rise in defense of the self-evident truth that all are created equal, and that the rights with which we are endowed by God are inalienable. We are called to imagine ourselves as if we personally stood on the banks of the Delaware river in the frigid December of 1776, ready to repel the forces of tyranny, to defend the liberty and sanctity of our nation, and to earn the love and thanks of our fellow citizens.

For if in this crisis we shrink from service to our country and acquiesce to tyranny, we will find the autocrat in the White House declaring the same authority as King George to “bind us in all cases whatsoever”, as he decides by executive decree who will live and who will die, who can find rest and who will be forced to wander, who will be accepted and embraced as “us” and who will be persecuted as “them”, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched.

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רעַ הַגְּזֵרָה

Through *T’shuvah*, through *T’fillah*, and through *Tzedakah* we can avert the severity of executive decree.

Our *Tzedakah* in this crisis is to protect our fellow citizens by ensuring that the organizations that safeguard our Constitutional liberties are well-funded. Our *T’fillah* in this crisis is to use those Constitutionally protected freedoms ourselves to join protests, marches, and other actions to cry out against injustice.

And our *T’shuvah* in this crisis is to return not only to who we are – and who we strive to be – as Jews, but who we are – and who we strive to be – as American patriots. We listen to the T’kiah of the Shofar, and also to the Shevarim and the T’ruah of the fife and drum. We recall words of philosopher-patriots written twelve-score years ago to inspire us to act today, to remind us of the liberty *we* fought for, the rivers *we* crossed, and how *we* withstood those moments of judgment.

Shivering in the cold, we hear Thomas Paine’s reassurance:

*“Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.”*

These 18th century words reverberate to give *our* hearts focus today, on this Rosh HaShana, as we begin the arduous process of *T’shuvah*. Penitence is not obtained cheaply. Facing who we are, who we can be, who we want to be – this is not obtained cheaply. Reimagining who we might be as Jews, as patriots, as human beings – this is not obtained cheaply, but rather only obtained by returning to the river and crossing it. The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. And the triumphant reward issued by heaven for this effort – for our *T’shuvah* – is nothing less than our freedom. Without *our* *T’shuvah*, there is no freedom.

So friends, let’s get to work. This is a moment of judgment. In our American crisis today, liberty is again at stake. Lives are in our hands. We have a severe decree to avert and a Republic to save.