

Drash–Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5785 at Congregation Netivot Shalom

Art Braufman October 4, 2024

Shanah Tovah– “Gut Yontif”

The idea for **this** drash started last February, **after** my drash about how each of us is a sanctuary for God and the best way to keep that in mind is the song “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine”. When Sheila and I returned home that Shabbat, we were surprised that the hallway was completely empty. Suddenly a young woman, briskly walking, approached and without slowing down exclaimed, “They’re waiting for you” and quickly disappeared.

We looked at each other, bewildered. WHO was waiting for us? We didn’t recall any appointments. As we entered the common area of our building it became clear. It was the Chinese New Year, and a huge party with dancing dragons and drums was underway.

I couldn’t, however, get that message out of my mind. It seemed mystical, almost as if a heavenly messenger, a MALACH (as described by Rabbi Chai yesterday) had delivered it. It has been uncanny how many times since February that the word WAIT appeared to me in various contexts and led me on the path to this drash. So, I decided that the title of today’s drash is “They’re Waiting for You.” If you don’t remember anything else I say, remember that title.

The word ‘waiting’ has many connotations. A Google search came up with over 30 similar words/phrases ranging from “Twiddle one’s thumbs’, Hold one’s horses’ to more biblical usages such as hope for, long for, expect. I’ll touch on those later.

Waiting is common in our society. Rabbi Sharon Brous, the founder of Ikar in Los Angeles and author of the book, The Amen Effect, describes an incident about “**Waiting**”. At a tashlich service on Rosh Hashanah afternoon at the beach, she distributed blank cards to congregants. She asked them to write an answer to one question, . . . “What are **you** waiting for?” Later, she laid out the cards and described them as (quote) “A sacred testimonial to life, love, and loss. Some people were waiting for someone to tell them they were beautiful, some waiting for dinner; one to start a band, some for parents to tell them they loved them, even though they turned out different from the way their parents had dreamed. Some were waiting to not be so sad, lost, or lonely. All of that waiting, just below the surface.” (enquote)

I’m going to pause a few moments while you silently think how you would answer *two questions*: “What are you waiting for? And **Why** are you **waiting**?” (PAUSE----- 15 seconds)

One answer that I thought of for myself is I’m waiting (longing) for the time when these days of polarization and hatred and violence can be reversed. I ask myself, what am I doing about it? This drash is my attempt to find a path forward.

Since the beginning of time, God has been waiting for us to be partners. The Torah and rabbis repeatedly teach that our Jewish ancestors made a covenant to create a world of peace, of justice, and universal brotherhood. We are the living generation of the Jewish people, a people that goes back over 4000 years. It's up to us to demonstrate that we are dedicated to that covenant. Those goals, however, throughout history, and particularly at this time seem beyond reach. To me I question whether we are passing the buck to God or are we doing our part? Are we waiting (holding back)? Why?

Rabbi Naomi Levy in her book Talking to God reminds us "that words are easy – it's the actions we need to take that require perseverance, strength, courage and faith". As God's partners and messengers, are we acting the way we think God wants us to act? She asks, (quote) "Is God having to wait for us? God is praying that we will finally learn how to utilize our strength to take full custody of our world"(enquote). I pray that we may turn complacency into action, soften our hardened hearts, transform our despair into hope.

A major action emphasized by Rabbi Brous is being open to others. Her chapter titled *Wonder* is introduced with a quote by Rabbi Nachman of Brezlov who said "*It's not hard work to **distance** yourself from another person. The real work is to draw them close and lift them up.*"

She tells this story:

"Hannah a lesbian member of Ikar, was in Jerusalem during the Jerusalem Pride parade, when a 16 year old LGBTQ ally was fatally stabbed by a zealot. A day later at a family Shabbat dinner celebrating a Bat Mitzvah, Hannah was seated next to Asher, a 20 year old friend of the family. She had heard that Asher had been radicalized and was part of a group of Israeli extremists that were outraged by the Pride parade. She was sick to sit next to him and even felt unsafe. As the meal progressed she wondered how any person could hold those views. Does he really believe them?"

"So what action does Hannah take? She forces herself to **stay** at the table, rather than getting up and leaving. Finally, she stands and speaking to the whole room, addresses the Bat Mitzvah, "You live in a time of great brokenness, every day there are stories about hate crimes, retaliations, racism, sexism, and senseless hatred. These are real challenges. Keep your heart open as you go through life, and don't ever lose your voice."

Three years later, Asher showed up at the Pride Parade, not to protest, but to join the march, holding a sign, "Hate kills, love is the only answer."

Rabbi Brous' story about that Shabbat meal setting describes situations that no doubt have become more than familiar to us over the past years. Friendships have been broken; colleagues are no longer recognizable, families shattered. We see others as existential threats. She tells the story, however, to emphasize that actions that lead to authentic human connection can be the deepest expression of faith. Those actions honor the image of God. They are a step towards "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself" and it could be the step needed to reduce divisiveness in our world. I hear her words, but there are many times when I don't think I have the ability or courage to take those steps. Maybe that explains **why** I wait (twiddle my thumbs).

Soon during the Musaf service, we will fervently chant the Unetaneh Tokef prayer asking who is to live and who is to die. The author of the prayer depicts us as sheep in line **waiting** for the shepherd, Adonai, to open our individual page in the book chronicling the past year, and then determining our fate. "*kivakarat roeh edro, maveer tzono tachat shivto*. Adonai reviews and counts each living being, inscribing their destiny.

The prayer to me raises the question, are we puppets whose fate is being manipulated by Divine strings? Or are we taking responsibility for our own actions?

When we come to that prayer, on p. 143, take time to read the commentary in the left column. The theme is not about God's decision, but rather a reflection of how our personal response to life situations, makes a difference to the outcome.

It's up to us to engrain our partnership with God in our everyday living. Not just for the sake of God, but for the sake of the Jewish people, and all humankind. We are a link in the chain of generations who have confronted difficult, terrible situations. It's up to us to serve as the link to the next generation. We have been given the gift of life, let us accept with gratitude the responsibilities put upon us by that gift. Rabbi Tarfon in Pirke Avot taught "לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אֲתָהּ בֶן חוּרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה". "You are not required to finish your work, but neither are you permitted to desist from it".

The struggles we face are numerous - - Climate change, antisemitism, Israel and her neighbors, the political turmoil in our country, the list goes on and on. These issues will continue for generations to come, but it's up to us to not **wait** to do the best we can.

Rabbi Tarfon's statement emphasizes the effort, not the outcome. It's permissible to come up short, as long as we've done the hard work. We, the Jewish people, need to make a deliberate choice to bind ourselves to the Divine. Think of the tefillin. When we wrap it upon our finger we say the words of Hosea (2:19-20), "*V'ayrastik li liolam*. I betroth you to Me forever. I betroth you to Me with righteousness and justice, with love and compassion. I betroth you to Me with faithfulness."

Those aren't passive words, but positive action verbs. We are binding ourselves to Adonai.

Sheila and I once took a course where the key concept was the phrase “My thoughts are programming my future”. By our prayers we are programming ourselves to do the best we can to do God’s will on earth and strengthen the hope that eventually justice and mercy will prevail.

Does that sound too simplistic . . . Or too overwhelming?

We all face personal limitations. We don’t have the ability to control huge universal issues. We are frequently at a loss how to proceed. Jewish sources preach that we must have **faith** in God to help us. Yet, our feelings of helplessness create stress, anger, frustration; we may end up not believing in God.

Yet, when we acutely feel the need for heavenly help, we find ourselves praying, just like Hannah in yesterday’s haphtorah. Since October 7, at our Shabbat service, we have been chanting from a page titled “Prayers in Time of Tragedy”. Psalm 130 on that page is a classic pleading with God. In Hebrew, there are three words for **wait** with different nuances: לְהַמְתִּין, לְחַכּוֹת, and לְיַחַל. In Psalm 130 the word used is לְיַחַל, which the siddur author translated as **wait**. In this case, the meaning is we hope, we expect, we anticipate. It is similar to the Hebrew word “kavey”- hope. The psalmist plants the seed of faith. In that context, listen to how the word **WAIT** is used:

From the depths, I call to You, Adonai.

Adonai, hear my voice, be attentive to my pleas.

I place my **hope** in Adonai, my whole being **hopes**;

I **await** God’s word,

I **wait** for Adonai - **More** than the watchman **waits** for the dawn

*O Israel, **wait** for Adonai.*

We have a great need these days to hope and trust in Adonai, . . . THE FORCE that makes existence possible. No matter what concept and name of the Divine works for you, requires faith, patience, and humility. Joe Primo CEO of Goodgrief.org describes it this way, “Life is full of mystery, the mystery is our invitation to let go and to embrace uncertainty with the fullness of our being. This is how hope becomes our compass in uncertain times.”

Psalm 27, the Psalm recited from the beginning of Elul through Hoshanah Rabah, on page 27 in our mahzor, clearly defines this hope and the difficulty in not losing faith, (quote) “If **only** I could **trust** that I would see God’s goodness in the land of the living . . . Place your hope in Adonai, *Kavey, Kavey el Adonai.*”

On this Rosh Hashanah, let each of us take a leap of faith, and demonstrate to Adonai, a commitment to the teachings of our ancestors to choose life, to have the courage to act in the way we believe God wants us to act, to reply to the call, “they’re waiting for you.”

May we be written and sealed in the Book of Life, so that little light within us will shine and brighten the days that God grants us.

Kayn yehi ratzon