

**“AS WE WERE SAYING YESTERDAY....”**

**Rosh Hashanah First Day**

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Fray Luis de León, a prominent 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish literary and religious figure of Jewish converso ancestry, had been imprisoned by the Inquisition on suspicion of “Judaizing” (that is, promoting Jewish ideas and practice). Upon being cleared of charges and released years later, he returned to his teaching podium at the University of Salamanca and started his lecture, saying: *Dicebamus hesterna die* – “As we were saying yesterday....”

This is one such “As we were saying yesterday” moment. It has been two years since we last gathered for High Holy Days in this sanctuary. I had hoped that this Rosh Hashanah we would be “Back home again at Beth-El Zedeck.” But, once again, we worship physically distanced, but not spiritually apart.

Despite all that has transpired, we pick up where we were, and move into the New Year carrying the experiences and lessons of the past, moving on to hopeful and healing tomorrows. “As we were saying yesterday....” But, what can we say today?! I have been giving much thought to that. There is so much to say, and not enough time, nor enough wisdom, to convey it.

Charles Dickens captured best the essence of our predicament: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...” All of these emotions wrapped into one, in no particular sequence or balance, we carry into the New Year.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has upended everything we thought we knew, everything we have experienced and seen: Illness, suffering, death, political and social upheaval, floods and fires, personal dislocation and distancing, fear and anger, racial and cultural bigotry, antisemitism, uncertainty....

While we all have participated in the Pandemic together, we each have experienced it in different ways, individually and as distinct communities, as a nation, as a world. American life changed decisively on March 13, 2020. The whole world was taken by surprise.

Science sought to give guidance, politics often got in the way of policy. Masks became for some a means of protection, while for others a statement of ideology. Understanding the virus and developing public policy defined the elections and triggered unrest in our streets and insurrection in D.C.

But even as things looked daunting and despair hovered, good things were happening. Science was developing vaccines. Physicians and health care providers were offering care. People were volunteering, being generous with their skills and their resources. In a year that was filled with noise, we also learned to listen to the sounds of silence. Some people became more thoughtful and introspective, as others took to the streets and to social media to proclaim their values and vent frustrations. In the Zoom

boxes of virtual communication, we learned to listen, to worship, to study. To be community.

The Pandemic highlighted the historic and long-lasting legacy of racial disparities in our nation; it triggered expression of anti-Black and anti-Asian, anti-Muslim, and antisemitic bigotry that lie sometimes overtly, sometimes camouflaged, in the hearts of others.

The physical virus put many on life support. But an even more frightening virus is putting our nation on life support, and there is no vaccine to protect us. That virus is hate. It feeds on lack of control, uncertainty and ignorance. It erupts on the streets, in all forms of media, and in the very halls of government. To counter it, we must name it. To counter it, we must do more than decry the worst behaviors, we must uplift and celebrate the best. We have been less than our dreams, but we have been more than our nightmares.

We learned new terms, concepts and practices: Critical Race Theory, DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), cancel culture. We learned to “adapt,” to “pivot,” to create “virtual communities.” We determined we had reached “inflection points;” we learned that versatility, adaptability, and fluidity were more helpful than static and fixed responses. Some learned they could work from home and work habits changed. Children struggled to learn virtually. Some prospered, some stumbled.

We cannot minimize the Pandemic’s devastating consequences. It has not only impacted and killed millions in our nation, but has also brought social and emotional damage to individuals and societies around the world. Autocratic regimes became entrenched. Terrorism surfaced. The Taliban took over. Democracy was challenged. The pressure cooker of social distancing for some, and unrelenting illness and death for others, exploded with damaging consequences and long-lasting results.

Social scientists estimate that Covid has lowered the life expectancy of our nation by an average of 1½ years, the largest decline since WW II. Increased social inequality has led to what sociologists call “deaths of despair” – addictions to drugs and alcohol, and suicide aggravated by Covid. Covid has both exposed and worsened health inequality.

The Pandemic has also caused us to be afraid. Afraid not only of the physical health threat of the virus. Afraid of increasing polarization, of our inability to communicate with those who have opposing ideas and antagonism to science.

I am fearful of the ways in which we demonize the other and accuse each other. I am mindful of the Genesis narrative we read on the New Year, the Binding of Isaac. This Rosh Hashana, we feel like Isaac, with a knife of impending doom poised above us. Whether it be a resurgence of the Covid 19 virus or of a long festering hate of the other, the threats of war, the ravages of hurricanes and wild fires, we feel bound by realities over which we have little control.

I am afraid, but I also hope. Isaac survived his ordeal, and here we are. An angel called Abraham’s name and Abraham responded, “Here I am.” And the angel said, “Do not

raise your hand against the boy..." Today the angel calls again, "Do not raise your hand against one another." And each of us must respond, "Here I am."

The mixed legacy of Covid is that it has sharpened the extremes: It has made some people meaner, some people kinder; it has raised our awareness of the importance of science; it has turned others to heightened superstition and conspiracy theories; it has put a light on and deepened poverty; it has made others wealthier; it has mired the world in despair and awakened us to the necessity of world cooperation and individual responsibility in order to achieve healing, renewal, and a future of possibility and hope. Covid has reminded us that none of us is in this alone; that we are all in it together.

Two stories illustrate this best:

- An anthropologist was teaching a game to the children of an African tribe. He placed a basket of delicious fresh fruit at the base of a tree and told them: "The first to reach the tree will get the basket." When he gave the start signal, he was surprised to see that the children held hands and walk together towards the basket. When he asked why they did that, when any one of them could have run to get the basket alone, they answered: "Ubuntu!" "How can one of us be happy while the rest are unhappy?!" "UBUNTU" in their native language means: "I am because we are."
- With the Tokyo Olympics recently completed, with its toll of victories and trail of disappointments, let us turn our attention to the 2016 Olympics in Brazil. The Associated Press reported at that time that New Zealand runner, Nikki Hamblin, was lying on the track dazed after a heavy fall, her hopes of an Olympic medal seemingly over. Suddenly, there was hand on her shoulder and a voice in her ear: "Get up. We have to finish this." It was American Abbey D'Agostino, offering to help. "WE have to finish this," she said.

It was a scene during a qualifying heat of the women's 5000 meters that the fans would never forget. D'Agostino set aside her hopes of making the final to look out for a fellow competitor. As it happens, D'Agostino had inadvertently clipped Hamblin from behind and they both went sprawling to the ground with about 2000 meters to go. Instead of running ahead to complete the race, D'Agostino "crouched down and put her hand on the New Zealander's shoulder, then under her arms to help her up..." the two injured athletes ran together offering each other encouragement and friendship. (New York Times, August 16, 2016). "UBUNTU!" "I am because we are."

American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum reflects about what it means to be fully human. She writes: "[Being human] is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility." The thought, "I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won't be a member of society anymore", means, "I won't be a human being anymore."

Significantly, our High Holy Day's prayers are written in the plural. We do not say: "I have sinned, I have spoken ill..." We confess "We have sinned..., we have spoken ill, we have failed". Each one of us has failed. But we are each part of a community. Failures of

one are failures of all. But, the strength of one, can be strength for all. And so, we have chosen to celebrate this New Year, distanced, but not apart.

Today we recite the same plural prayers and commitments that we affirmed two years ago when we last met for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in this same Sanctuary, and for millennia before. The world has changed; we have changed. We have hurt, and we have cried; we have lost and we have stood by; we have experienced; we have witnessed; we have learned that moving forward requires collective effort. Yes, individual initiative and creativity are important, but as part of shared endeavor and a sense of common humanity.

As we return the Torah Scroll to the Holy Ark, we chanted: *HASHIVENU ADONAI ELEIKHA V'NASHUVA HADESH YAMEINU K'KEDEM* – “Cause us to return, O God, renew our days *K'KEDEM*.” *K'KEDEM* is one of those Hebrew words that means both “something” and its “opposite.” It means “going back” and “going forward.”

We take with us the lessons of the past years, the memories, the mourning, the moments when we learned to celebrate, cry and laugh in ways we hadn't imagined possible. We wrap it all together in a bundle of memory and hope, and we say: *K'KEDEM*. Let us go forth; UBUNTU, together. I am because we are.

“As we were saying yesterday....” L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu.

May we be inscribed for a year of goodness and health, joys and peace.