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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue

Finding Renewal in the New Year

“What are we supposed to do about what’s going on in our country?” This question has been posed to me so many times over the past year. I imagine many of you have heard it yourselves. It’s usually accompanied by a sigh and hands thrown up in the air and often some colorful words. I know: shocking that Beth Emet congregants would use colorful language, right? (and in talking to the rabbi, no less!) Perhaps it says something about the times we live in.

So many of us in this community have expressed our fears and despair and at times feel overwhelmed by what we see as meanness, bigotry, and a lack of fairness in our society.

We are disheartened by the sight of children separated from their parents at the border, wild fires in the West, floods in the South, rampant gun violence in our streets, schools, concert venues...homes. Over the past year, I have spoken with many of you who are working tirelessly in the trenches on issues plaguing our society, from gun control, to racial justice, immigrant rights, reproductive freedoms, sexual harassment and assault. The list goes on. On one Shabbat over the summer I quipped, “another week, another protest.” I’ve been amazed at the energy, commitment, and passion that I’ve seen displayed.

Along with this hard work, however, I’ve witnessed frustration and burn out, especially when a just resolution of the issues we are confronting seems nowhere in sight.

For some, the struggles are more personal—we are dealing with illness, loss, a difficult relationship unemployment.

Every morning in our daily liturgy, we marvel and give thanks for the renewal of creation. “*Mehadash b’chol yom tamid ma’aseh v’reshit*. God in your goodness you continually renew the work of creation.” Without any effort on our part, the sun comes up in the morning and sets in the evening. And we recite this line to remind ourselves that this is miraculous. That each day is a new beginning filled with the possibility of renewal.

And yet, for us human beings, renewal somehow doesn’t come as easy as the sun rising in the East. We wake up in the morning to the news of more forest fires in the West, sexual harassment, racial discrimination, global warming... or we glance at our phones before we get out of bed and read about another incidence of gun violence or the trauma inflicted on migrant children.

It’s enough to want to pull the covers over your head and announce that you’re not coming out! We doubt that we can have an impact. Disillusionment and despair can so easily set in.

Then there are the most immediate struggles in our lives. Some are struggling with illness or a difficult employment situation, or something is going on with a loved one. We wake up knowing that people in our own lives face insurmountable debt, there may be dissatisfaction with the trajectory of our lives: Did I make good choices? How do I get out of this dead-end job? Where is there meaning? Fulfillment? Love? A paycheck.

I suspect we have all felt a few of these emotions. And the world seems to dole out more of them today. Is it the president? Perhaps. The media? Maybe. Social media? Almost certainly.

Yet, here we sit in new chairs in our beautifully renovated sanctuary welcoming in this so-called “season of renewal.”

So, how are we supposed to connect the one to the other? In what ways do the prayers and rituals of the Days of Awe connect to the struggles we experience, the struggles we witness others experiencing, the times we are living in, which seem to lurch from one civic crisis to the next?

Rosh Hashanah offers a road map for our renewal—a way forward despite the troubles in our lives or our anguish, anger, (despair?) at the state of our society.

The themes found in the shofar service teach us how we can be reinvigorated as we welcome the new year. Not without effort...not without soul-searching. But I submit to you that there is a path here for us.

A path of renewal, a path of restoration, a path to renewed balance, notwithstanding the hardships in our lives in the lives of people we love and in the lives of total strangers whose plight is nonetheless important to our sense of justice.

Tomorrow, we will hear three different series of shofar blasts; each represents a way we can look at the world and our lives and find renewed hope and strength for the coming year.

Today, we celebrate the sixth day of creation when human beings were created. According to the Book of Genesis, it is on this day that God blew the breath of life into the first human being.

Today part of our ritual is to coronate God as our sovereign for another year.

Wait, that’s the solution Rabbi London is proffering for the craziness we are dealing with? Crowning God as our ruler? Sorry, that just does not resonate!

It’s true. The language of the machzor can be a tough read for the 21st century American raised on a diet of “be all that you can be,” “nothing can stop you if you put your mind to it”...“Just Do It.” Individualism and self-actualization. (Don’t get me wrong, I do think Colin Kaepernick should “just do it.”)

But I think the Rosh Hashanah machzor with its language of rulers and sovereigns still has something to teach us.

The first set of shofar blasts is called *Malchuyot*-sovereignty. We declare God’s presence in our life and that we are beholden to divine values. The second set of blasts is called *Zichronot*-memory. We recall how God was our savior in the past. We have been in difficult situations before, and we are not destined to be forever stuck. The final set of blasts is called *Shofarot*—shofars—when we anticipate the sounding of the shofar that will occur at some point in the future heralding the arrival of the messianic era—a time when difficulties will cease, and peace and justice will reign.

In short, *Malchuyot* – God rules in our lives. *Zichronot* – We have been saved from hardships in the past. *Shofarot* – a better future is possible.

Let’s return to this concept of *Malchuyot*- Sovereignty.

Let's just stipulate here that the notion of crowning God as king is archaic and even off-putting. Calling God "sovereign" instead of "king" may take the gender issues out of the equation, but God is still anthropomorphized and is still clearly set up as an authority figure, superior to us in the image of sovereign or ruler. The Reform Movement and other liberal denominations have wrestled with the idea of God as king. You may have noticed that in our own *Mahzor*, we leave "*Avinu Malkeinu*" untranslated to avoid the masculine imagery of God as king and father. But what are we to make of God as ruler?

Calling God ruler means we believe that we have responsibilities beyond our personal concerns and we are beholden to divine values. As we will read in our shofar service tomorrow: "Teach us to make you *melech*—sovereign in our life; to align ourselves with Your goodness and truth."

Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld, wrote in his book "The Steadfast Stream," that the definition for Jews of "faith" is not belief in any credo necessarily. Rather, for Jews, faith -- "emunah," --means "persistence," despite the uncertainty of difficult challenges. That was the "emunah" of the prophets—to keep on speaking, keep on working, persistently.

Persistence. How do we find the strength and develop the faith to live in a productive and constructive manner? When we declare God as sovereign in our lives, we see God as a source of support and guidance. Whether or distress is personal or society, we need to care for our souls.

In preparation for this evening, I interviewed a number of people—some who work in a social justice field or in religion, others who have faced significant personal struggle. And I asked them how they renew themselves and what gives them hope.

Sara Blumenthal, a Beth Emet member and rabbinic student, told me that singing, meditating, unplugging, and getting quiet help her to feel centered and to feel God's presence in her life. And that expressing gratitude helps to bolster her. In times of despair, remembering what she is thankful for helps shift her mood from despair to optimism. She also experiences communal prayer as an outlet that allows her to feel difficult emotions in a supportive environment. Something shifts for the better after she's expressed what's painful. At these moments she feels like her world is renewed a little bit and her partnership with God is strengthened.

Ben Wolf, a Beth Emet member and long-time legal director of the ACLU of Illinois told me that when he feels depleted by his work, turning to loving family and friends is nurturing. He also agrees with Sara that it's important to feel the pain in the world. He shared with me a story about the ACLU's work with a 5-year-old who had been separated from his parents. Although they've been reunited, the trauma he experienced continues. The pain is real. It's human and healthy to feel the pain in our lives and the world.

My teacher, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, died last week. At her funeral, her son shared that he wished he could be anywhere else besides at his mother's funeral. He then taught how his mother would respond to such a comment: "Wishing things were different than they are is how we turn pain into suffering."

Sitting with our feelings honestly is adaptive and healthy, albeit difficult, which is why community support is so helpful. Processing difficult feelings alone is hard.

Declaring God as sovereign also reminds us that it's not all up to us. If we take a break, the sun will still come up tomorrow. It may be as simple as shutting off the news for a little while.

Nina Kavin, a Beth Emet member, community activist and editor and writer for the Facebook page, Dear Evanston, said, "I find renewal in silence and solitude—turning off the 24/7 barrage of "virtual" connection and of news, information, opinions that scream out of my tv, phone, computer, radio, and newspaper and doing something physical, a project at home, exercise, a walk on the lake, where I can "power off," and "reset" my mind. I take time to appreciate the small things in life and the people I love and who love me.

The overwhelming beauty and timelessness of nature that often puts the daily grind into perspective. I also find renewal in the company of others—face to face, not virtual--a real hug, handshake, human touch, that's invigorating and energizing. That's renewal to me."

All of these techniques help us to shift our perspective on how we see the world. And how we experience the world has an impact on how we act. I have a yoga instructor who lost his arm in a car accident 8 years ago. For a long time, his chronic pain left him severely depressed and dependent on opioids. After much struggle, he developed the following attitude as a way to cope with the pain:

He said: "I believe that life really boils down to 3 very simple concepts – CHOICE, FAITH, and PERSPECTIVE. You have heard the scientific principle that there is only one true constant in life -- **CHANGE!** While we have no ability to stop change from occurring, we each have the capacity to **CHOOSE** how to deal or cope with that change. We can either roll with it like a river that runs into a rock and easily finds a way around the obstacle, or we can oppose change and, as a result, **we feel PAIN!** Yes, feeling pain," he said, "is also a choice to some extent. In other words, by me choosing to allow the pain to dictate the terms of my life, I gave away my power granting the pain the authority to rule and shape my entire existence.

He continued: "I am not saying that the pain was not and is not very real for me, but rather that in my mind, I built the pain up to an almost insurmountable obstacle that I chose to give up and stop fighting rather than to face and embrace the pain head on just like any other part of me."

He also tries to focus on the good he can accomplish each day. "I start each day with the thought and intention of who can I help today? How can I be "of service" and make the world better? Everywhere and everyone is an opportunity to do so, at Starbucks, on the podiums at the yoga schools where I teach, at the grocery store... I honestly believe putting good into the world for good's-sake, for no other reason other than I can and it's the right thing to do, without any expectation of receiving something in return, is my superpower. By sending this goodness out into the universe, it's like a karmic boomerang. You can call it God, energy, karma or whatever it is that resonates with you, as I believe they are all one in the same, that goodness comes back to us and is exponentially multiplied!"

During the *Malchuyot* portion of tomorrow's service, rather than envisioning God as a sovereign ruler in some worldly sense, we should be focused on cultivating a relationship with the divine. And reminding ourselves that doing so can nurture and strengthen us, helping us to find peace and live productively, especially in a chaotic and difficult world.

Zichronot—Remembrances

Our foundational story is that we were freed from Egyptian bondage. The cycle of slavery can be broken. We are not doomed to be forever enslaved. In the *Zichronot* section of the shofar service, we remember that God rescued our ancestors. “After the flood, in the wake of destruction, Noah discovered the rainbow. Abraham, alone on a mountain, with a knife in his hand, heard the voice of compassion. Hagar, at the end of her strength, afraid for her child, found a well in the wilderness... When cruelty and hate diminish, we say “God remembered”—The Israelites [who were enslaved] were groaning under the bondage and cried out; God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob” and liberated them.

Nina Kavin says: “Resilience is a word I think about a lot. And hope. Our people, the Jewish people, have survived and thrived on both of those—and faith and introspection—going back all the way to the beginning. It’s what makes us ... us. There are so many examples. From weeping as exiles by the rivers of Babylon to creating a vibrant Jewish community there that lasted for more than 2,000 years. Haman. Antiochus. And so on. Losing 6 million souls in the Holocaust but holding on to our culture, traditions, and identity through it all.

The idea behind all our holidays: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.” Today, we face increased anti-Semitism, assimilation, as well as our own challenges in terms of our homeland, Israel, and the direction in which it’s headed. But we continue to evolve and examine and adapt ... and survive and thrive. I believe that being raised Jewish has played a huge part in imbuing me with the qualities of resilience, optimism, and a sense of hope.”

Zichronot. God remembers. *Zichronot* reminds us that the Jewish peoples has experienced suffering and hardship in the past, but also redemption. As you entered the sanctuary this evening, you may have noticed the new placement of the bronze sculpture that used to hang here on the wall of the sanctuary. On the sculpture is a line from Psalm 145: *Karov Adonai le-chol korav*. And we’ve added a translation on the wall adjacent to the sculpture: “God is near to all who call out.” *Zichronot*. God remembers when we call out. What a fitting mantra for us to meditate on during the *Zichronot* portion of tomorrow’s service.

Shofarot—shofars

Hope in the future. We act even if we don’t see immediate change because we believe that our actions will have ultimate value for the future. It’s hard to persist day in and day out when we might not see noticeable changes. Cultivating hope that the future really will be better than the present can help us not stay mired in the difficulties of our present reality. A vision for a better future can energize us. As we pray in this section of the shofar service: “Goodness of the world—*Tuvo shel Olam*, today we stand before the shofar to hear its voice of hope—resilient and strong, proclaiming freedom, promising redemption. In days to come, a great shofar will be sounded: those lost in the land of Assyria and those cast away in the land of Egypt shall come back and worship Adonai on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.”

Michael Fine, my yoga teacher says he finds hope through our children: “The vision I hold for the future through the most recent toxic times we are living through is that our children will somehow be able to right the path we are headed down. Our children have the capacity to remake the model to forge forward on a platform based on love, tolerance, collaboration rather than the current model based on fear, hate & division.”

Ben Wolf also finds hope in the next generation: “Although things are hard, support for the ACLU has increased dramatically and the young lawyers who work at the ACLU are full of optimism. I’m fortunate to be able to mentor people to be the best advocates for the future.

And Judaism has a construct of the messiah which reminds me of the inevitability of progress. I feel fortunate to be able to act on my values. Fighting for what I believe is much better than stewing about it.”

Nina Vinik, Beth Emet member who works for the Joyce Foundation to reduce gun violence has been traveling with the teens from Parkland, Florida since the mass shooting in their school this spring. These are some reasons why working with the Parkland teens gives her hope:

“1. Their first impulse is to be inclusive - they’ve engaged with their peers from Chicago, Ferguson, Baltimore and elsewhere, and always giving them the spotlight. They know they are incredibly fortunate to have the media’s attention while other young activists from other cities don’t. They don’t have to be reminded about inclusion - it’s their default mode.

2. They don’t hesitate to engage with people who disagree with them. In many cities they’ve been confronted by pro-gun protesters. Rather than shouting back, they’ve invited the protesters into a dialog and found that there are many things they agree on. There really is common ground on this issue.

3. They’re impatient. Adults understand the long arc of history. The Parkland youth aren’t waiting their turn. They don’t want to be doing this in 10 years because they don’t want there to be the need to advocate for gun safety in 10 years.

4. They’ve made voting cool. Our democracy only works when people show up.”

And Nina Kavin says: “My hope for the future rests on this: there are good people who will never give up pushing for a better tomorrow.”

Shofarot—the shofar blows, and we are reminded to look at our lives with the conviction that the future can be better than the present. We are not stuck in our ways, and real change is possible.

We are on the cusp of a new year. We have so much to be grateful for and to celebrate. Yet we also acknowledge that trouble and pain exist in our lives and in our world. The shofar blows to remind us that when we’ve experienced pain in our past, we’ve been redeemed. The flood ended, the ram was sacrificed instead of Isaac, Hagar found water, and our people went free from Egyptian bondage. The shofar blows to remind us to sustain ourselves through spiritual care and seeing our good actions in the world as reward in and of themselves. The shofar blows to remind us that a better future is possible and that the next generation can teach us, inspire us and push us toward that future. We thank God for our community, for this moment to reflect and celebrate, and for all the opportunities to do good deeds, enjoy our loved ones, and work to create a better future together.