

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 2020

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My friends,

What a year this has been. We started this evening with an old poem, asking for an end to the curses of the past year, and the beginning of a year of blessings. We hope so, we certainly hope so. But we begin this year with a mixture of both hope and great trepidation. I need hardly go into the ways in which our country and our planet are imperiled, the ways in which suffering has multiplied this year to levels that horrify us: The agonies of families and victims of covid19, the continuing dangers to loved ones in schools and workplaces and nursing homes, wildfires on the west coast, and hurricanes so numerous the forecasters have to turn to the Greek alphabet to name them – we are living with levels of anxiety and tension of a society out of whack with what we have come to expect in America.

We in the Jewish community are mostly privileged – incomparably so. Has there ever been a Jewish community overall as wealthy, as comfortable, as confident and relaxed as we have been in America in the last 20 years or more? But we are not *as* comfortable now. Forces have been unleashed in the world that are not easily tamed: increasing incidents of anti-Semitism and other hate acts, polarizing leadership, rising levels of mistrust in civil society, intense worries about the fairness of the upcoming election, and the sense that our federal government has become malevolent and unworthy of our trust. In short, we are disturbed to our core.

In the last few years, I've often heard people say that it feels like the world is coming to an end. And I thought that was alarmism. But now we are sensing that even if the world isn't coming to an end, the world we knew before is not coming back quickly. Now more than ever, we feel the unpredictable hazards of this pandemic, the many ways we are vulnerable and reliant on other people to keep us safe.

And yet -- this is the holiday of the beginning of the world, not the end. We celebrate what we have, even while we grieve what is lost. We ask God, *Zochreinu l'chaim*, remember us for life, recalling the metaphor of the book of life in which we inscribe our names for the coming year. *Zochreinu l'chayim, Melech chafetz ba'chayim* – remember us for life, Sovereign who desires life. These words from the Amidah on High Holidays which both congregations have taken as a theme this year – these words are not just a reminder to God to remember us for life; they're a reminder to *us*, to set *our* minds on life. To do whatever we need... to stay alive and help others stay alive. To keep remembering that we must choose life in all we do.

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Zochreinu -- Remember.... of course memory is a big part of the High Holidays – we have Yizkor on Yom Kippur to remember our loved ones. Tomorrow's Torah reading starts off with God remembering Sarah and the promise of offspring. And one of the three themes of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is Zichronot/ Memories.

But if God is supposed to remember us at this time of year, what are we supposed to remember? Many of us take time on High Holidays to reflect on the year that passed -- our personal achievements and failures, our health and our illnesses, our community's successes and difficulties, the wider record of our society. Many of us ruminate over slights and hurts, failures and upsets we've experienced. But what kinds of memories, what kind of remembering can actually *help* us navigate the waters ahead?

Our tradition has a daily “memory” practice that has fallen into disuse but might warrant another look. It is the Kabbalistic custom of concluding daily services with six remembrances – *sheish zechirot*, it's called – a series of six verses from the Torah that have the word *zachor*/remember in them.

The first Zachor is about remembering the Exodus – every day of your life, remember you are a free person. We cannot, must not take that for granted. And the second Zachor is to remember that you stood at Sinai and received the Torah there. It's still miraculous that we have a book, a set of guiding principles, phenomenal, flawed, but full of life, that we still carry with us till today.

So far so good. But then come three disasters that occurred in the wilderness that we are supposed to remember -- and LEARN FROM. You can probably guess the first disaster -- we need to remember that when we get impatient, when we want to misplace our trust in something tangible, shiny, something like a Golden Calf, something less than the totality of the Source of Life, we get ourselves in big trouble. So it's a reminder to ask ourselves: what am I idolizing with my life? How am I losing perspective on what's true.

Now there were plenty of other disasters in the wilderness to choose from. So it's interesting that the next one our rabbis chose was the incident where Miriam and Aaron spoke ill of Moses. Perhaps that is a reminder not to engage in infighting within our leadership. But the main lesson from that incident that our tradition teaches is the power of words -- and especially, the destructive power of negative words. As our confessionals on Yom Kippur remind us, we must always be so careful with what we say and how we say it.

The third disaster in the wilderness is one we more commonly recall at Purim, but I want to say more about it tonight. The Torah declares: *Zachor et Amalek* -- Remember Amalek, the nation that attacked Israel in the wilderness when it was most vulnerable, the nation that picked off the weak stragglers in the back, *hanecheshalim acharecha*, and doomed them to destruction. What Amalek did to you in the desert, cries the Torah -- was an unforgivable sin -- and you must remember to blot out its memory.

Now, I'm sorry, but what does it mean *to remember to blot out* the memory of something? Wouldn't it be easier to just remove Amalek from our Torah and collective memory? And why does the Torah seem so vindictive about Amalek, when other nations attacked the Israelites in the wilderness as well?

Our Hasidic rebbes had a different and wise take on this passage. One of them wrote: "Had the children of Israel not forgotten about the slower ones in back but instead, brought them closer under the protecting wings of God's Presence, binding the slower ones to all of Israel, the Amalekites would not have succeeded in their attack. But because you allowed the slower ones to be *aharekha* (meaning both "behind you" and "acher/other"), because you separated them off from you and made them other, and you forgot about your brothers and sisters, Amalek could viciously attack them. Therefore, the Torah tells us to remember Amalek, so

that we never forget to bring our brothers and sisters who need special attention into our midst."

Our rabbis tell us that in every generation there is an Amalek – a force ready to destroy us. Our existence on this earth, our continuity as a people, our future as a country – none of that is given. We need to remember that. Perhaps the coronavirus in our time is an Amalek. Many of the more fortunate among us can take effective, if difficult, precautions. But, we are cautioned to remember, if we stop caring about the more vulnerable and exposed – the elderly reliant upon assistance, the immunocompromised, the essential workers who accept great risks to do their jobs, people of color who are disadvantaged on numerous levels, people who might be driven into hunger and homelessness by the economics of covid -- if we march ahead heedless of what is happening to those left behind, if we turn the vulnerable into "others", then Amalek will indeed continue to wreak havoc on us. *Zachor et Amalek* -- we must remember to blot out indifference and heartlessness in our response to Amalek in the wilderness.

That brings us to five daily reminders of how we should act as part of a people: remember freedom, remember the Torah's moral guidance, watch our tendency toward idolatry, watch our language, make sure we do not "other" the vulnerable. And what is the sixth remembrance? – *Zachor et yom haShabbat l'kadsho* -- Remember the Sabbath – because whether we are in the wilderness OR in the promised land, whether we are working or not working, we need the respite of one day each week to recover our souls, to restore our energies, to refocus on what is lasting and eternal and true, to remember that each of us started off with a pure soul and can return to that soul. Daily, we are reminded to remember Shabbat -- Shabbos is coming! -- to remember that we are more than our working lives or our daily routines can measure.

So what do we make of this daily memory practice? One thing I notice is the importance of directing memory and taking lessons from our past. Memory is a spiritual practice of its own. Our memory practice needs to be directed *l'chayim* -- to benefit and guide our lives. So ask yourselves, as you embark on these High Holidays, -- what do I actively want to remember ... from this year and years past? What painful memories do I want to learn from and shape? How can I make

memories, personal and collective both, serve the interests of a healthy life, serve to make lasting meaning from our *chayim*?

But if we engage in a memory practice each day, what then do we need the High Holidays for? I think the gift of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur lies in reminding us that it is not just “others” who are vulnerable. We are all mortal, all subject to failings, all in need of second, third, and fourth chances, all struggling to do the right thing and all desperately desiring to be remembered for life -- we and our children and our parents, our spouses and cousins and neighbors, our grocery store workers, our pharmacists, and our delivery people, our doctors and teachers and nurses and artists and factory workers. We are all essential. We are all vulnerable. Remember us ALL for life. For Your sake, God, and for ours.