

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5772
September 28, 2011

You may know the story of the toddler who is healthy and happy in every way, except that he doesn't talk. One day, he asks for an extra blanket at bedtime. His parents are thrilled. They bring him the blanket and then ask why he had never spoken. The toddler replied "up until now, everything has been ok."

Rosh Hashana marks the new year and, according to Jewish tradition, the anniversary of the creation of the world. Only two hours old, this baby new year has been pretty quiet, pretty simple. For most babies and young children, life is pretty basic. Things are usually good and predictable. Yet as we get older, life becomes far more complex.

Whether we wanted to or not, we all grew up a lot this past year, as we have had to do for several years. Other than those who were sheltered by loved ones or whose circumstances allowed them to smoothly ride out the economic storms, an increasing number of us have been experiencing trying times.

As children, we believe that our parents can solve any problem. As adults, we come to realize that true solutions to major economic problems in our nation and our world require more than a kiss and a *Band Aid*.

We live in tough times. Those who have not lost their job have most likely seen their investments crumble, while social, financial and governmental institutions tumble.

Yet while these are far from the best of times, neither are they the worst of times. All of us who remember September 11, 2001 can vividly recall the horror, the uncertainty, the fear that gripped our nation on that day and those which followed.

Since 1985, I have worked with six hundred b'nai mitzvah students here at Beth Am Temple. While the students' Torah portions dealt with commandments or events, the Haftarah portions generally delivered a message of hope and consolation. These portions come from the Biblical prophets, who lived centuries after the end of the Torah. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others spoke to our ancestors, who had experienced traumas such as the conquering of the nation and the destruction of their central shrine, King Solomon's Temple.

Like our World Trade Center, it was their most visible building. For hundreds of thousands, it was the focus of their daily life: where they worshipped, socialized and often came to do business. And now it was gone. Jerusalem, their capital city, was conquered. Large numbers of their people, including the leadership, had been exiled to Babylonia hundreds of miles away. The war to defend Jerusalem and the Temple had decimated families. For many decades, life was very, very bad and the Biblical prophets kept the spirits of our people up through messages of hope and consolation.

For much of the past five years, our nation has also been going through some very difficult times. We have had our wars, our financial crises, our societal issues, but if we are to be honest, they pale in comparison to what we experienced only a decade ago following 9-11, as they do next to what the Israelites endured thousands of years ago.

The Jewish people healed from these emotional, economic and physical traumas. Similarly, we Americans came together, at least for a while, and overcame the emotional, economic and physical traumas of ten years ago. We are strong and resilient people who will get through the current turmoil as well. The key, as all of our religious and historical leadership tell us, is not to give up hope. It is only when we give up hope that all is lost.

Earlier this year, I gave a sermon which was critical of a young college student who took his own life after being emotionally harassed by his roommate and other students for being gay. My message was that no matter how bad life may seem at the moment, there is always somewhere to go, someone to be with, something to do. There is no justification for a mentally and physically healthy person killing him or herself.

Not long ago, a 14 year old gay student from western New York State, who suffered from constant bullying delivered a very intelligent message online

about never giving up hope and then, ten days ago, he took his own life. I am sympathetic to what this young man was going through. Clearly, it was awful.

However, I cannot condone someone who is just beginning his life throwing it all away because of being bullied, no matter how deep the pain. There are always viable options and suicide is not one of them. Life is too precious a gift to throw away.

I can understand someone with no options taking their life. On 9-11, some jumped out of burning buildings. Concentration camp prisoners sometimes walked into electrified fences. I can understand someone with a terminal illness feeling this way. For people with no hope at all for their future, escaping the pain quickly seems like a viable option and perhaps it is. However, anyone who has the opportunity and the option to remove themselves from their painful situation has no excuse for taking their own life. What is necessary is to break out of the routine we have set for ourselves and that is what the shofar calls us to do every Rosh Hashana.

On the High Holy Days, we acknowledge that we are influenced by those around us, but Judaism's message is very clear and direct: we are responsible for our actions. Though we may feel pressure from those around us, we all have free will. We all have the power to improve our lives if we are willing to change.

Almost any upsetting situation can be improved by something as simple as a change of scenery. It doesn't need to be a vacation in South Beach, it can be a drive to the countryside or going to a movie. Time and physical distance ease so many emotional stresses and we live in a very stressful age. Some of us have lost jobs, many have suffered economic hardship. And even those who have kept their heads above water are increasingly aware that the economic hammer can hit them as well.

However, people have also found jobs, others have overcome economic adversity. As negatively as we may view the world and our lives at times of stress, it often takes just one or two changes, a romance, an offer to go to a ball game, a new friendship, to break us out of our negative mindset.

What also helps is hope, the long-term vision that we have gone through this and more ten years ago, we have gone through this twenty years ago, we have gone through this at many different periods of our lives, even if we forget. And our people has gone through far worse than this many times, which is why we hear messages of hope and consolation in our Haftarah portions. These are not empty messages, but rather words from people in the midst of the storm.

There will be a better day. We can overcome adversity by working together, worshipping together, socializing together and supporting one another . . . together.

We can taste despair, but we dare not accept it as a permanent menu item. The death of a loved one, by contrast, is permanent. However, with the passage of time and support from others, so many here and elsewhere have emerged from this traumatic experience as emotionally healthy adults, living productive, meaningful lives.

And if it is possible to carry on after the death of a loved one, it is clearly possible to endure temporary economic hardship, no matter how profound it may seem at the moment.

The Hope, Hatikvah, is the national anthem of Israel. Children who have everything handed to them do not taste despair. It is those who have to struggle, like generations of our people did to create the State of Israel, who rely on hope to help them achieve their goal.

Birthdays are times of hope and today is the birthday of the world on the Jewish calendar. It is a new year, with new possibilities, new options, new hopes.

Whatever we have encountered this past year, we have now survived it and we are in a position to make a new beginning.

Some of us seek major changes this new year, while others are basically content with their lot. As a community, we approach the new year with a combination of hope and positive attitude. May these qualities deliver accomplishment and

success. May 5772 be a year in which we never allow ourselves to surrender to despair. a year in which the message of our heritage reminds us that we have survived, we have overcome and we will do so again and again, if necessary, until we reach our goal.

At the end of our Passover seders we say “L’shana habaah b’Yerushalayim,” next year in Jerusalem. And while that will literally be true for a couple dozen of us, the purpose of “Next Year in Jerusalem” is to affirm that there is always hope for a future better than the present. It is only when we allow hope to die that we allow ourselves to die. AMEN