



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2021/5782

“I Love to Walk”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon, September 7th, 2021

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I love to walk. Wherever I have lived I have found wonderful places to walk- in Eugene Oregon among the redwoods, in the forests of the Berkshires, along the Gulf of Mexico in Sarasota and now, along the seacoast, right here in New Castle. I have been blessed to live in beautiful places and to walk through the seasons on so many gorgeous paths. With no destination in mind, but simply to immerse in the pleasure of movement, my surrounds have brought me comfort, revitalization and sometimes inspiration. I am reminded of the very first command given to Avram in the Torah – *Lekh Lkha* - Go forth... go to a place that “I will show you”. Leave all that is familiar and just go, without knowing where you are headed. It is time to leave behind all you have known, all that is comfortable and get yourself onto a new path. It is the journey and not the destination that forms the roots of our spiritual legacy and our destiny.

As we travel through the Torah itself we receive this message repeatedly . In describing the place where the Israelites will eventually land and celebrate their festivals, the Torah uses the phrase: *bamakom asher yivhar Adonai*- in the place that God will choose, rather than naming that destination. This phrase appears dozens of times, forming a kind of poetic trope, never revealing where that place is but instead, impressing upon us the value of the journey itself. “Go to the place where I will establish My Name,... to the place that Adonai will choose...”. To not know where we are headed, but nevertheless remain anchored in trust, that we will arrive where we are meant to be, is a profound spiritual challenge.

Thus, our tradition is concerned not with where we are headed but rather how we walk the path. What is the nature of our walking? How do we behave as we traverse the wilderness?

Just a few weeks ago we read in the book of Devarim/Deuteronomy (Deut. 10:12) *Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to revere the Eternal One, your God and to walk in God's ways...*

The Rabbis naturally ask the question: what does it mean to walk in God's ways? And they answer this way: Just as God is merciful and compassionate, so should we be merciful and compassionate. How we greet each moment, each person, each situation along the path will define the substance of our lives.

This past year we entered a new kind of wilderness, one seemingly ruled over by a three-headed monster: a global health crisis, environmental catastrophes and socio-political upheaval. So much of what we had counted on for stability and security seems to have been ripped away. It has been a year of profound stresses and painful losses, a year of grief and fear, a year of unmet needs and desires, a year of loneliness and a year of sorrow. It is no surprise that we have witnessed increased outbursts of cruelty, a rise in gun violence, in domestic violence, in antisemitic attacks, hate crimes and attacks on the Asian community. A pervasive sense of insecurity has contributed to a profound erosion of trust.

We sit together today at the start of a new year with the deep question of how we will meet each new day? How will each of us walk through this wilderness? How might we each walk a path of gratitude, of forgiveness and renewed trust?

We can begin to explore this question by considering what we actually learned and gained this past year. Despite the extreme challenges, this has also been a year of recognizing the value of human connection, the delicious power of hugs and simple acts of kindness toward one another. We have discovered how fragile is our democracy and how precious and in need of our full attention and protection. And so many of us have reconnected with the beauty and healing potential within nature. Reeling from one natural disaster to the next, we have begun to take some bold steps toward reclaiming a balanced world. With God's help, we all certainly pray that it might be enough to get us through this time of dizzying disequilibrium.

Today, I am asking you to consider: What are the blessings in your lives? What have you learned about yourself, about your priorities during this strange and bewildering time? What matters most to you? In other words, what are your *Covid-Keepers*?

There is a story handed down by Richard Wilhelm, a theologian and teacher of Chinese philosophy.

There was a great drought where Wilhelm lived. For months there had not been a drop of rain and the situation became catastrophic. After much prayer the people said: We will fetch the rain maker. And from another province, a dried-up old man appeared. The only thing he asked for was a quiet little house somewhere, and there he locked himself in for three days. On the fourth day clouds gathered to everyone's surprise, a great snowstorm arrived though it was not even winter! The people were astonished. Wilhelm went to ask the man how he did it. He said: "They call you the rain maker, will you tell me how you made the snow?" And the little Chinese man said: "I did not make the snow, I am not responsible." "But what have you done these three days?" "Oh, I can explain that. I come from another country where things are in order. Here things are out of order, they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. Since the whole country is not in balance, I am also not in order because I am in a disordered country. So, I put myself inside and had to wait three days until I had put myself back in order, and then naturally the rain came. (1)

My friends, we are living through a time like no other- where the entire world is out of order. It has been an overwhelming time and we have all felt a sense of powerlessness. The Shaman in our story delivers a simple yet profound message, when the world around us is in disorder, when we are walking through an uncharted wilderness full of unexpected dangers, there is one thing we can all do- and that is -put *ourselves* back in order. And by doing so, we may bring more order to the world around us.

This summer I particularly enjoyed watching the Olympics, seeing the power of human potential, directed and focused, achieving what seemed to be beyond human capabilities. And, during these tremendous accomplishments, the story of Simone Biles, known as "the greatest gymnast of all time," emerged as a powerful call to self-care. In a vaulting competition she lost her bearings, became disoriented and could not tell where she was in the air. When she completed the vault she announced that she needed to withdraw from the competition. She felt she could not "trust" herself. She recognized that she was no longer "in order" and needed to pull out of this most high-stake world competition, so that she could put herself back in order. What a powerful act of discipline and bravery.

Simone teaches a powerful lesson, that when we are disoriented and overwhelmed, the best thing we can do is to pause and *re-center*.

Each year as we mark the passage of time through elaborate High Holiday rituals, our tradition offers a treasury of spiritual tools to put ourselves back in order. Perhaps there is one prayer, one image, one line that speaks to your heart, that reconnects you to a deeper truth within. But beyond these High Holy Days and looking to the year ahead, perhaps there is an activity like walking or dancing, cycling or yoga, listening to music or playing with a child, that reconnects you with your deep core and brings you back into balance. For some it might be meditation or journaling, or simply making of a list each day of the that which you are grateful for. Whatever it may be, I ask you today to commit to finding that which brings you back to center, back into balance and make a dedicated time for it. For as we do so, we re-establish trust in ourselves and from that foundation of stability, we help bring the world back into natural harmony.

Today the shofar calls upon us to awaken from our slumber. This year our entire world sounds the shofar, sounds the alarm. I ask of myself and us all, how will we put ourselves in order, each day, as we move forward together on the path to a place we do not yet know...?

1. Jung, C.G. (1997). Visions 1 (ed. C. Douglas), Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 333.