



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2023/5784

“Birds, Bees and Butterflies” **Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Day 1, 5784/2023** **Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman**

I want to begin by thanking Pastor David Clark whose ideas greatly influenced my sermon today.

We are so blessed to live in such a beautiful place, where each season brings its treasures and where in particular, the fleeting days of the seacoast summer expresses a kind of perfection that launches us all into a state of gratitude. How can we not be grateful? Opening my shades most mornings to the blue sky, the clean air, the sounds of birdsong lifts my spirits. And what makes the summer all the more precious, is that we all know in our bones, that this will not last. For ahead of us lie six months of descending energy; of cold and chill before we can return to this perfection. And so, at this *tekufat hashanah*- this turning of the year, we gather together our entire community at this perfected moment of balance- as the Autumn Equinox lies right before us. We take nourishment, courage and strength from our community. We engage in ancient rituals to prepare us in body and soul for the changes to come. We are travelers through the seasons of life, always turning and re-turning. In the midst of change we find comfort in the steadiness of our ritual lives, in family memories, in our community, in our relationships.

As New Englanders, we can all relate on a personal level to the change in seasons and all that entails; mulching the garden, bringing in the wood, pulling out the boots and sweaters, thinking about soup! But today I am raising a question about the times we are living through, the grand seasonal changes we are facing as one human family on this earth. We appear to be entering a new season in which our



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environment has become ever more unstable, unpredictable, and degraded. Additionally, we are confronting the use of Artificial Intelligence. We have begun to learn that we cannot necessarily trust our eyes or ears to ascertain reality. These two developments alone threaten the balance of our world in numerous ways. But it is not my intention to share a doomsday talk. Rather, I want to remind us all that within the wisdom of nature and within the wisdom of our sustaining Jewish teachings, we have many solutions to these challenges and much to be hopeful for.

In the changing seasons, we see that that through the artistry of our Creator, the animals have all developed ways to get through the inhospitable winter. Each species has its particular adaptations. I'd like to share with you three adaptational skills expressed by birds, bees, and butterflies. I would call this the Torah of the Earth for the root of the word Torah is "teaching."

Pastor David Clark writes: As the end of summer brings longer and longer nights, something deep within the black-capped chickadee's DNA switches on. While the darkness increases so does the shape of their brain. Their hippocampus, the part of the brain that holds onto special information and memory, grows! It adds new cells, neurons, and connections to hold onto every seed it hides. Here in New England the chickadee has a range of about 30 square miles and within that range it will create hundreds and hundreds of seed caches. And after the snow checks in, it will visit them daily to feed. In order to do this, the chickadee needs more memory than it does in the spring and summer.

Today we gather together on Yom HaZikaron- the special name for Rosh Hashanah meaning the Day of Remembrance or the Day of Memory. We come together as one community to nurture our collective and personal memories, to



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strengthen ourselves for the long winter ahead. We prepare the special recipes of our grandmothers, we light her candlesticks, don the tallit of a cherished father or grandfather, hear the shofar whose sound echoes through the generations. We tell the stories of our ancestors in ritualized forms. We increase our memory so that we know where all the seed caches reside; so that when we are hungry and struggling through a cold winter day, we can access the teachings, lessons, love and nourishment of our past. We come to shul on Rosh Hashanah in part, to grow our memories and store our seeds for the wintry time ahead.

Regarding the Honey Bee, Pastor Clark writes: *these incredible communities of sisters (and a few males of singular usefulness) respond to the arrival of the cold by shutting the doors of the hive. All of the bees gather round the queen in the center of their home and just vibrate. They vibrate in order to create enough body heat to keep the hive constantly warm- over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, while bitter winter whips outside.*

Bees born in the spring and summer live for about a month. This means that sisters born in the sweetness of one summer will not live to see the next. But for the bees born in the fall, these daughters will see it through, living 4-5 months. These are called Winter Bees. They will never fly. They will never gather pollen, or climb into a flower or see the sun. They break out of their honeycomb, climb into ranks, thorax to thorax, right up against their sisters and make heat. Every winter an entire generation of honeybee is born and lives in the darkness within the hive and then dies just as spring is gathering its strength.

We can draw many interesting lessons from this behavior, but what I want to point out is that the way a community survives difficult times is by gathering together around a sacred center. There are times for individualism and there are



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times to shore up and strengthen a loving community. There are times to soar about and drink the nectar and there are times to strengthen the collective. We need to understand the season we inhabit in order to respond effectively.

Bees are teaching us that in times of great change, times that threaten the whole community, the survival of the whole depends upon all the individuals playing their part to maintain all that is precious and vulnerable. We, however, live in a culture that prizes individualism, and personal freedom. These values have their place. But today, when we are indeed facing catastrophic possibilities, it is the power of putting aside personal gain, and supporting the good of the whole that will see us through. This is always what has seen us through. These days, as we watch the news of catastrophic fires, floods, and wind, we see before us the good will and caring behavior of neighbors. Gone is a sense of individual competition, replaced instead by the hands of lovingkindness. In this season of change, let us not wait for the disasters to call up the goodness in us. Now is the time to warm the hive, to gather together and discover how we can be of best support to one another.

Judaism herself, espouses a culture of “WE” rather than “ME”. That is why we need 10 people to show up to create a minyan in order for one to say the kaddish prayer. We do not mourn alone. And that is also why our prayers are written in the plural form. Aleinu, which we sing at the end of every prayer service means it is upon **us!** We do not pray - it is upon **me**. And that is also why our confessional prayers we will offer on Yom Kippur- (sing) ashamnu, bagadnu are also written in the first-person plural. Whether we have personally committed these acts or not, we all claim responsibility, because Judaism is a culture of We and not Me. Because Judaism has long understood what quantum scientists have espoused in recent decades, that all living beings on Earth are part of a single organism (see



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Neil These: Notes on Complexity, Consciousness and Being) or as Walt Whitman wrote, “every atom belonging to me, as good belongs belongs to you.”

We are living through a season in which the politics of identity trumpet our differences, pit one group against another, censor our children’s books and their education. We are living through a season in which extreme individualism fuels hatred and threatens our communal well-being. In such a season as this, we would be wise to follow the lesson of the bees and gather together to devote all of our energy to the welfare of All.

And of butterflies: Pastor David Clark writes:

Monarch butterflies live for about 4 weeks, give or take, once they emerge with their wings. All those born in June and July spend their time among the flowers. Sweet smells and sweet nectar. That is, unless they emerge in late August or early September. Monarchs you might recall, don’t stick around for fall or winter. The first tremors of cold, the first rumors of winter activate something in those who are born in early fall. This generation, the migrating generation, when they emerge and take to the sky, they will outlive their spring and summertime siblings 8 fold, living for over 30 weeks instead of just 4, had they been born a month earlier. To put that into perspective, it would be like every third or fourth generation of human being living over 600 years. Entomologists aren’t sure how this happens, other than the fact that it seems to take monarch butterflies about 30 weeks or so to fly from New England to Mexico.

It seems that built into the DNA of life is the **persistence** of life. The butterflies push on, week after week, defying any apparent limitations because of the hope and the promise of reaching the next season of warmth and rest that is before them. They do not lie down in despondency or resist the changes needed. They



are not mired in fear, weighed down by complacency. They move forward, defying all odds.

Pastor Clark writes:

"...they live and live richly because the hope of what is to come, of the breaking of winter into summer, the knowledge of the next great blessing is written into their DNA, the foundation of who they are, so they cannot help but live-LIVE with meaning and purpose and direction through the times though they are hard and confusing and a distant memory from the easiness of other seasons."

And so today I ask the question- what is written in your DNA about times like these? What is written in **our** DNA about moving through times like these? Let us all ask ourselves, what are the gifts we are meant to bring, in these times, in which we are blessed to live and thrive?

We stand at the threshold of a new season and a new year. After the Shofar is sounded tomorrow we will recite the familiar passage: *Hayom Harat Ha-olam...*, often translated as : On this day the world is born anew. But the second word Harat- literally means to be pregnant. On Rosh Hashanah the world is pregnant with possibilities for a new creation. On this day we are asked to consider our role in bringing this new world to birth. These are days to spend in contemplation as well as celebration.

Our spiritual inheritance, written into the soul of every human being is that Teshuvah- return and repentance is always possible. It may be a long hard journey, but we are capable of making the needed changes. Our Rabbis teach that before the world was created God created Teshuvah. In other words, the capacity for changing course is baked into our spiritual DNA.



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At the turn of seasons our chickadees teach us the power and strength of memory, our connection to all the seeds of support planted in our collective and personal pasts. Our bees teach us to put aside individual desires and become a community that serves the good of the whole. Our butterflies teach us persistence and determination to reach the new season. And our Torah reminds us that it is indeed possible to reach the Promised land.

With Gods help, Ken Yehi Ratzon, may it be so. May it be a path of joy and peace for all. Amein v'Amein!