

## SERMON FOR FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANAH 5779

*Eitz chayim hi lamachazikim bah, v'tom'cheha m'ushar.  
D'rachecha darchei noam v'chol n'tivoteha shalom.  
Hashivenu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem.*

[The Torah] is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it, and those who uphold it are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace peace. Return us to you, God, and we shall surely return, renew our days as of old.

- Proverbs 3:18; Liturgy

Someone – I forget now who it was – told me I should read this new book about trees. It's a bestseller, she told me, and it's amazing.

I had only one question for her.

“Can I get a sermon out of it?”

She paused only briefly. “Uh, sure,” she said. “Oh, yeah, definitely.”

“Hmmm.” I was a bit skeptical. “What would the sermon be about?” I prodded.

“I have no idea,” she responded.

I ordered the book anyway. On the spot. That's because, as an Amazon Prime member, I can do those sorts of things. With free delivery. Any time I want. Plus, it was August 1<sup>st</sup>. I was desperate.

Mind you, it's not that I had put off thinking about sermon topics this summer. Quite the opposite. Daily, I was deluged with appeals to tackle urgent social justice issues at the upcoming High Holidays: caring for the poor, standing up for free speech, fighting anti-Semitism and racism, welcoming the stranger, protecting refugees,

saving the environment, addressing gun violence, ensuring access to education and healthcare, highlighting the importance of telling the truth, promoting religious pluralism in Israel – all of these based on deeply-held Jewish values.

And, at the same time, relating all of that to the overarching theme of the season, which is *teshuvah* - individual and collective returning, repentance and renewal.

With each of these exhortations to speak out (received every day multiple times via email and social media), I felt more and more pressure. When my friend and colleague, Rabbi Josh Hammerman, posted the following on his blog that only upped the ante. He wrote:

Rabbis everywhere are approaching the Days of Awe with more than the usual degree of trepidation. We always walk a tightrope, seeking that sweet spot balancing the timeless and the timely, the suffering soul and the body politic. But not since 9/11 has our mission been so clear. Feel-good sermons always feel good, but Rome is burning, and we've no choice but to talk about it....Jews will be looking to their rabbis for inspiration next week. We can't flee like Jonah. There is no place to hide. ...Rosh HaShanah 5779 is a moment, that, for rabbis, will define not just our careers, but — just maybe — our lives.

Oy. [Ahem] I was struck by Rabbi Hammerman's phrase "there is no place to hide." Here's right. I know, because I tried hiding out. Briefly.

I went to the Cape at the beginning of August and vowed not to read the paper or look at breaking news updates on my phone. I tried to just clear my head. I went swimming every day and looked out at the ocean and ate lovely food and, well, just breathed. But, then, much too soon, I came back. And, you know how it is. No, I mean it. You know *exactly* how it is. Right?

The unremitting, constant barrage of news and noise and nonsense, of vitriol and hate-speech and daily crises, both real and manufactured. It makes all the personal challenges in our lives that much more difficult to deal with. It's all too much. It isn't healthy. It makes us feel stressed and anxious. Or tired and depressed. Irritable with those around us. All we want to do is: Make. It. Stop.

Scientists tell us that our brains are designed to shut down when the cacophony of our lives gets too loud. Our ability to occasionally summon up superhuman strength, courage and determination is meant to be exactly that: *occasional*. When we are faced with a life or death challenge or confront a dire emergency, our hypothalamus activates two systems: the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenal-cortical system in what is commonly known as the "fight or flight response."

That's great if you're being chased by a bear (not so impossible in this neck of the woods) or called to help someone who's been hurt. That's what our "fight or flight response" was designed for. But when it gets triggered daily, that's a problem. Physically, mentally and spiritually.

When I came home from the Cape, reality rushed in and my mind filled to bursting again. The sound of the waves, the smell of the sea, the sense of peace immediately evaporated. I downloaded three mindfulness stress-reduction apps on my phone, but found I had neither the time nor the patience to do the meditations.

There was one bright spot, however. Among the piles of mail and packages was the book I had been eagerly awaiting, the international bestseller which I had been assured would contain that magical sermon spark. It was entitled: *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*. I tore open the package and began reading.

The author, Peter Wohlleben, manages a forest in the Eifel mountains in Germany and for many years, he'd wanted to write a book describing "what the trees had taught" him. He writes in his Introduction:

"I encourage you to look around where you live. What dramas are being played out in wooded areas you can explore? ...This book is a lens to take a closer look at what you might have taken for granted. Slow down, breathe deep, and look around. What can you hear? What do you see? How do you feel?"

It was lovely, reading that book. For a while, anyway. I must admit that at first, I found the reading kind of, well, slow. I mean, that's probably not so surprising. It's a book about trees. Trees develop slowly. They don't grow or change or mature, don't live or die, overnight. Most of the book was about science: about the importance of biodiversity, about climate change and stress, diseases of trees and rain and sun, about soil composition and the wonders of photosynthesis. I mean, it was a good book; as someone who loves oxygen, I'm a great fan of photosynthesis.

But there was more to this book. Step by step, Wohlleben brings together a host of scientific studies with his own personal observations and makes the case that a forest is much more than the trees within it; *it comprises a social network*. Trees, he asserts, are like human families: tree parents live together with their children, communicate with them, support them as they grow, tree communities share nutrients with those who are sick or struggling, and even warn each other of impending dangers. Trees, in other words, thrive, *when they are connected*. And those connections are deep and complex and though not necessarily visible to us, absolutely essential.

My family and I live in a condo just up the road from this synagogue and one of the main things that attracted us to the place was that it's an end unit, nestled among giant old-growth trees. There's something about those trees. Their emerald beauty, soaring branches, and rooted solidity. They are a mixture of pines and firs, oaks and maples, so that some lose their leaves in winter, while others stay green. In every season, they lift my spirits.

Rabbi Yisrael of Chortov taught:

When a person is down on her fortune and has lost all hope, she should ponder a tree in winter. Its leaves have fallen, its moisture has dried up, it is almost a dead stump in the ground. Then, suddenly, it begins to revive and to draw moisture from the Earth. Slowly, it blossoms, then brings forth fruits. A person should learn from this not to despair, but to take hope and have courage, for she too is like a tree.

Hasidic leader Reb Yisrael and forestry expert Wohlleben are from different worlds, but both of them recognize that there is a world of connection and life hidden beneath the surface of trees and that this ought to be a model for us. The poet Marge Piercy echoes that same idea in one of my favorite poems of hers, "Seven of Pentacles." She writes:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet....

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.

Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,  
a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us  
interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.  
Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:  
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in...

Don't even *try* to go it alone, the poet tells us. Take your cue from the trees,  
from the thicket of roots intertwining underground. "Weave real connections...  
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in."

My friends, despite the American myths of rugged individualism and the self-made man (or woman), we thrive when we rely on and care for one another, when we recognize our commonalities and intertwine. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, sitting all alone in a jail cell in Birmingham: We are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one [of us] directly, affects all [of us] indirectly." [Letter from a Birmingham Jail]

Our interconnections make us who we are; our *connectedness* helps us become decent, caring and loving human beings. In her book, *Daring Greatly*, Dr. Brene Brown writes: "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering." [p.9]

Here's the problem, though. More often than not, all I want to do is *dis*-connect. I want to shut off the news and crawl back under the covers. I'm sick of it all. Tired of all the arguing. Tired of feeling responsible. Tired of caring. Frankly, I'm just tired.

Tomorrow is the second day of the new year of 5779. It's also the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. Most of you here are old enough to remember that day. For those who weren't, let me just tell you what that time was like.

Our country was in shock. We were terrified. And we had no idea what would happen next. There was huge loss of life, the airports had all closed down, there was disarray everywhere, especially in New York, but also in other places which were hit, in Pennsylvania, in Washington, and where my family was living at the time, in Boston, where one of the planes had taken off.

It was only a few days before Rosh Hashanah and I remember hearing so many stories from my congregants about how those who were away had done everything possible to get back to their families for the holiday, taking buses and renting cars to drive across the country. We all wanted to be together.

There was a special feeling in those early weeks. It wasn't all beautiful, of course, as our Muslim neighbors soon found out. It helped that President Bush immediately spoke out against rising Islamophobia. But mostly, there was a sense of love and strength and solidarity that eclipsed the fear and uncertainty. Money poured in for victims' families, blood banks were filled with donations, folks were kinder to each other. For a while, we looked out for each other.

And then...it dissipated. Our reaction to 9/11 had been like that fight or flight response to an emergency. We had rallied and come together in the wake of a crisis. But we couldn't sustain it. Because maintaining that level of energy is hard. Maybe it's not even possible.

Long ago, the Sage Rabbi Tarfon comforted us: *Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*, it's not your duty to complete the task, *v'lo atah ben horin l'hibatel mimena*, but neither are you free to abandon it. The challenge is: How do we keep going, once the crisis is

over? How do we stay engaged and energized when the crisis seems never-ending? How do sustain hope and compassion over the long haul? How do I connect when all I want to do is *dis-connect*?

These are big, important questions, with no easy answers. But there is no more perfect day to ponder them than today, on Rosh Hashanah.

Why do I say that? What is Rosh Hashanah about, anyway? Most of us would say it's about apples and honey and sweetness and the possibility of new beginnings. That's true.

It's about listening to the call of the shofar and waking up from our complacency and realizing our responsibilities, and that's also true.

And, of course, it's about *teshuvah*, repentance. And while that's true of this whole season, which began four weeks ago at the start of the month of Elul, and culminates with Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah has its own distinctive theme.

If Yom Kippur is a day focused on *us and our deeds*, Rosh Hashanah focuses on *God and the Universe*. Yom Kippur is about the Jewish people. Rosh Hashanah is about all of humanity, all of Creation. What are the words we recite after the shofar is blown?

*Hayom harat olam.* "This day the world is conceived. This is the anniversary of Creation."

On Rosh Hashanah we imagine God as a Ruler enthroned on High, or as a loving Parent and imagine ourselves as beloved creatures or children. On Yom Kippur, we are at the very *center* of things, but today, today we are just children, we are brothers and sisters to every other human being on this earth, indeed we are one with all of Creation.

Today we acknowledge that we are not in charge of this Universe, that the earth is not our plaything, that we didn't create it, we don't own it, we just care for it. As Abraham Joshua Heschel observed: "There are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world – we may exploit it, we may enjoy it, we may accept it in awe." On Rosh Hashanah we accept the Universe with awe.

Mussar master Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe writes in his *Essays on Elul*:

"The entire creation is unified and clings together, for 'We all have one ancestor,' and all creation draws close to one another, one great family. We humans are close to the inanimate world, for it is written, 'We are dust.' We are close to plant life for we also have the life force in us. Our closeness to animals is even more pronounced. We don't even need to say how much closeness there is between different nations and races...."

Rabbi Wolbe's student, Rabbi David Jaffe observes:

"For Rav Wolbe, connection comes from shared properties. We are made of minerals and water so we are intrinsically connected to the physical universe; we *grow* so we are connected to all that grows. Why then would we act in such destructive ways towards the planet, animals and other humans? Rav Wolbe points out that the root of the Hebrew word for cruel (*akhzar*) means estrangement. Only when we make other people or the earth as "strangers" can we be cruel."

Think about that for a moment. "Only when we make other people or the earth as 'strangers' can we be cruel." Only when we call them "other," can we demonize them, call them evil and attack them.

So let's take a breath. Let's think about the gift of this day. A day to *dis*-connect from the noise and the nonsense. A day to *re*-connect with what is most essential. With the notion of connection itself. And love.

For Rabbi Wolbe, the "essence of life" and "the message of the entire Torah" is "love" and building a "world of connection through Torah and mitzvot."

The Psalmist wrote long ago: *Olam hesed yibaneh* -The world shall be built on *hesed*, on love." [Psalms 89:3] *Olam hesed yibaneh*.

Today is the first day of this new year of 5779.

O God, *M'kor HaHayyim*, Source of All Life - help us envision a world built on love and connection, rather than estrangement, disconnection and cruelty.

Let that vision of love and connection inspire us when we get tired and discouraged.

Help us to lovingly care for ourselves this year so that we may care for others and stand up for those who need our voice.

May we aspire to be like the trees that Peter Wohlleben observed in his beloved forest, reaching out in manifold ways to listen and tend to each other, entwined and supportive.

Remind us that we are connected to You, to one another, and to this precious world, connected at our very roots.

We are grateful for this day, for this new year, pregnant with possibility of love.  
*Amen.*

*Shanah tovah u'metukah!* Wishing you sweet new year!

