

# Rosh Hashanah 5780

## Old and New

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L'shana Tova.

Our service this morning, like so much of life here at the Temple, represents a sophisticated and complex combination of old and new. Some of the prayers and melodies and rituals are ancient—so old that they are called ‘mi-Sinai,’ or from Sinai. Others are new, written or created by modern thinkers, writers or composers.

Our Temple radiates the beauty of old and new. We have stunning new Torah mantels, both special white covers for the holidays and beautiful blue covers for the rest of the year. And we have beautiful carved wood pieces on the Bima, hand-made for our use. We follow many ancient customs while embracing modern understandings and changes.

And the combination of old and new aptly describes each of us this morning. Each of us carries memories and traditions from generations gone by, and each of us looks out to the future with hopes and dreams, new ideas, new understandings waiting to be fulfilled.

We approach this new year of 5780, this new decade of life for us with an additional layer of both old and new as we consider the future of our community in a new physical location, with all of the opportunities and challenges inherent in a major move. We all want to preserve the best of the old. And we all appreciate the possibilities that come with something new.

This year our gathering carries a different level of holiness. This year we look around at the old, thinking of where we have been, what we have celebrated and mourned. But just as with the liturgy of the holiday, we must do more than look back. On this day we are called to look ahead, to embrace the new even as we preserve the old. This day we see the two, old and new, as a matched couple of sorts, two parts each of us carries within us.

At our home, my family and I see this dichotomy daily. Inside our garage, two black cars sit next to one another. They both have seats, engines, windows, doors, wheels, tires. But that's pretty much where the similarities end. One is a 2019 model, and the other is a 1918 model. One is Melissa's car—a modern Toyota hybrid with enough room to haul around our family. And the other is a Ford Model T, a car which has been in my family since the mid 1950s and given to me after my grandfather's death in 2004.

Yes, it is true that I am a car guy, so indulge me for just a moment!

The model T is an open touring car, starts with a hand crank, has no gas pedal, and is filled with wonderful memories of parades and parks and ice cream cones from my youth. This summer I went to a special driving school at a car museum in Michigan to learn how to drive it.

The model T was revolutionary—it was the first automobile made for the masses. Affordable and easy to repair, believe it or not still today over 100,000 Ford Model T's are driven daily around the world.

The Toyota too is revolutionary. The hybrid system means the car is powered partly by a gas motor and partly by an electric motor. Depressing the brake pedal works to charge the electric motor, so in daily driving the charge remains fairly constant. Engines like these reduce reliance on gasoline, resulting in better emissions and economy.

When we bought the Toyota last winter, the dealer sat with us to explain how the car works. At first, we both gave quizzical looks—after all, we have both driven many cars over the years. The dealer explained that hybrids can be driven any of a number of ways, but to reach the full potential of the technology, certain patterns were worth learning and using.

He told us that if we continued to drive this car as we had other cars, we would see only modest improvement. But if we learned to operate the new system as it was designed, we could realize all of the benefits of this new modern automobile.

As I listened, I thought, of all things, about the High Holy Days. On these days we make choices—to follow the patterns of the past, or to try new roads, learning new paths, embracing new ideas. We have a choice. We can carry on as we have, or we can adapt to the new. If we carry on as we have, we actually move backwards, because the world around us keeps moving. Yet if we go too far forward, we risk losing our history.

We Jews have lived with this challenge from our earliest days. After Adam and Eve left the garden they had a choice to make. They could continue as they had in the garden, though times and circumstances had changed, or they could remember the lessons of the past while embracing their new world.

Noah faced the same choice when the ark finally reached dry land. Look back at what had been or look forward to what can yet be. Recall the past and use it as a guide or ignore it and risk facing the same difficulties again and again.

Abraham encountered this challenge when he received a call from God. Leave home, leave all that he knew, the safety of his parents' protection to strike out on his own, or sit still, watching the world whiz by.

When Moses saw the bush aflame he faced a choice. Recognize the holiness and uniqueness of the moment, make the changes suggested by God, or just keep walking, following the sheep around making sure none wandered too far off.

Time after time our people faced decision points. In each and every instance our people dug deep, clarified core values, honored and remembered the past, and with head held high moved forward into an unknown future.

As a congregation, Temple Concord enjoys a rich history overflowing with decision points, moments when our elders faced a new set of questions, a new set of needs. When our founding families first came together, they recognized that the rag-tag model of a service here or there was no longer sufficient. They began with regular services, and by 1839 recognized that the Jews of Syracuse were numerous enough to warrant a permanent and formal congregation.

Those founders knew that they would benefit from investing in each other. They recognized that together they could benefit, that together they could create more of everything for their children. So, they drew up a constitution, and in September of 1839 incorporated as a house of worship in the state of New York.

Within just a few years, as their numbers grew, they recognized that they needed more than an association. They needed a physical home. But a home required, money, land, and vision. All three proved to be a challenge.

Many of the founders of our synagogue considered themselves traditional Jews, yet among the membership were many who were part of the new batch of more liberal and less observant Jews. A real debate ensued, some arguing that the building should be a traditional synagogue with the bima in the middle, a women's gallery upstairs, and a mikveh in the basement. Others wanted a more modern look—mixed seating, a high bima on one end of the sanctuary.

In the end they compromised. The building had a high bima on one end, but still had a women's gallery. But the compromise only held for a short time. Within a few years a group of the original founders, those who were more traditional in outlook, found that they simply could not tolerate the reforms. So, they broke away and built their own building just a few blocks away.

Temple Concord continued to grow, even without the cadre of founding families, and by the turn of the twentieth century found the existing building inadequate. The congregation had changed—the present building no longer fit their needs. They needed a modern space, a synagogue which would reflect their values. But money was tight. Finances were not favorable and the board wrestled for years and years about what to do.

And then one day the temple received an unusual opportunity. Herman Leiter, a long-time Temple member had died, and without telling anyone in advance, he left a large bequest

to the Temple. His gift was the spark needed, and soon Temple leaders began scouting for the right land on which to build a new building. They settled on this corner, a hill in a leafy neighborhood. Some argued that they paid too much, others that it was too fancy a neighborhood but most were pleased and proud of the new Temple, an edifice which well reflected the values of the congregation.

And for most of the last one hundred years, this building has served us well. But just as before, finances became a challenge. In time the building reflected some but not all of our values, while at the same time becoming less than ideal for the congregation. And again, as before, an unusual opportunity presented itself. The summer was filled with meetings and conversations, and as you know, a vote to sell this property.

Our gathering this Rosh Hashanah brings us to another of those liminal moments, a time of decision like those faced by Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Moses. As we move forward together, we will, I am certain, embrace our tradition of honoring our history while also reaching for the best future possible. We will create a home which reflects our values as fully as possible. We will carry the lessons and memories and mementos of this building with us just as our ancestors did before.

But this holiday of Rosh Hashanah is not only a time of collective prayer and planning and dreaming. These Days of Awe afford each of us the opportunity to ask ourselves the important questions we so often ignore.

As we consider our lives over the past twelve months, what pieces do we wish to carry with us into the new year? Which values are most dear, and which elements of our inheritance deserve continued honor and respect? Just as we ask these questions of ourselves as a Temple family, we must also ask the questions individually.

When Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham and Moses made the enormous decisions which changed their lives, they did so with a strong sense of self. None of them could have imagined the eternal effects of their choices. For each of them, the decision was much more a question of what was best for them individually. They faced their own anxieties and fears, and concluded that a new path was necessary.

They evaluated their past and present, and with every ounce of gumption they could muster, made a choice for their future. Today each of us faces that same choice. Each of us must overcome our fears, the questions and concerns we all harbor. As we choose for ourselves, we also choose for our community.

So today, together let's dream and dream big. Imagine a congregational home that is both modern and respectful of history. Picture a fully accessible Temple, an inspiring sanctuary, a place easy to reach and yes, with easy parking. See a temple inviting and welcoming, a meeting place and a second home. Visualize modern classrooms, a modern

library. Let that picture work through your mind. Add your own touches, your own ideas, your own values. And then join together with all of us to create our next home.

The next home for our congregation must reflect our values. Each of us has a role to play, and each of us is needed. Ours is a congregation of individuals united by beliefs and values and practices. Our futures will be exponentially brighter if we recognize the importance of every individual and the power of the community for all of us.

Back when my Model T was first created, Henry Ford thought he had something special. He had no idea it would be revolutionary, but the time and his skills matched and he embraced the possibilities presented. A hundred years later Toyota did the same thing by perfecting a hybrid system, helping America and the world reimagine not just transportation but our commitment to the environment as well.

Today we are revolutionaries. We stand on the cusp of unexplored possibility. A unique set of circumstances allows us the chance to evaluate old and new in our midst, to dream together, to plan together, to build together. We are now standing where Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Henry Ford and so many others once stood.

Their task now becomes our call. Each of us faces the future with the same kinds of experiences and memories our ancestors carried. Each of us must now gather all the courage and conviction and even chutzpah that we can so that we too can move forward with direction, discipline, and a destination in mind.

Our tradition grants us a gift this day, even as it might be gift-wrapped in unknowing or even fear and anxiety. Today the shofar calls—find the excitement and fearlessness of youth, tear open that gift, explore it, play with it, and together we will create with it and make our dreams a reality.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.