



5778 - Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon - Rabbis Lauren Holtzblatt and Aaron Alexander

Intro: Rabbi Holtzblatt

Helen Keller once said that "Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light." *Repeat.*

You know what. She was right. If the faith we preach from this bimah week-in and week-out is worth its weight in salt, we ought be able to point to countless moments of shimmering or flickering light created *by and for* this community.

Because faith, when it is doing what it is meant to do, is a catalyst, **the** catalyst, for producing the endless supply of light embedded in each one of us.

So the questions we asked ourselves leading up to Rosh Hashana this year are:

In What Do We have Faith?

In Whom do we place our faith?

And where have we seen and experienced faith's light here at Adas?

1) Rabbi Holtzblatt

Light has emerged this year from the Bereavement Committee. This summer during the month of August, when many community members were away, 2 beloved people died. The funerals were set to be on the same day hours apart. Tahara, the ritual cleansing of the body needed to be performed for both of our congregants. Normally, we would seek to find 8 members of the tahara committee to perform this ritual, 4 for each ritual cleansing as it is a process that is an emotionally and physically draining process. But it was August. And it was hard to find 4 people in town. When the team of 4 who had gathered to perform tahara on the first congregant found out that there was in fact another deceased member who was in need of tahara and that it would be difficult to find another team of 4, these holy souls decided that they would stay together and perform 2 taharot in a row so that the funerals could go on as planned.

In whom and in what do we have faith? In the boundless love that surrounds all of our members, alive or dead, and the families that mourn.

2) Rabbi Alexander: On that same day, a two funeral/two-tahara day, I needed to be in multiple places: Adas, the cemetery, and then with my family in Annapolis. The timing would need to be precise for me to meet all my obligations. As I was making final preparation for the funeral service here at Adas, Geno, a member of our maintenance staff walked into the office to tell me that my left-rear tire was low. Very low. With a hole, apparently. There was no time for a new tire and Penina already had the family van in Annapolis. The funeral was about to begin, and I'd be quickly leaving right afterwards for the cemetery.

When I walked out to my car after the service, Geno was there, with Charles, and with his little portable tire filler-upper contraption (that's the official and technical name). He said he'd been constantly filling it, so that at the moment I needed to leave it would have enough air to get me to Southeast. Charles had his truck next to my car, keys in--ignition on. He said: here, take my truck just in case. We know where you are going and how important it is for the community that you make it. I told him I needed to go straight to Annapolis to meet Penina and the family for outing. He said - take it for as long as you need it. I'll be fine.

In hindsight, I should have taken him up on that offer.

In whom and in what do we have faith? *In our Adas staff and their passion for the sacred mission of this place.*

3) Rabbi Holtzblatt

Over the last year and half, under the lay leadership of Rae Grad, the Hesed committee has grown enormously. The committee has delivered hundreds of meals a year to congregants who are sick, called members who are 85 and older once a week to say Shabbat Shalom, cooked and stocked the refrigerator in the Kay with food to be delivered to congregants in need, visited homebound members and delivered hundreds of baskets full of goodies to new parents and new members. And then this, A congregant comes into the rabbinic suite one day to say hello. She will be 90 in October and is very close with another congregant who is 90. They have been delivering the Rosh Hashanah bags together for years (Honey cake made by the Hesed cooking team). They did it again this year. The congregant said since the gifts go to older people, so when they finish their run they each take a bag and give it to the other. With love, with gratitude and with plans to keep on giving until they are 120.

In whom and in what do we have faith? In the way that people in this community care for each other- with love, empathy and humor.

4) Rabbi Alexander:

Just a couple of weeks ago, as schools throughout the area were beginning, Rabbi Holtzblatt and I were in my office deeply studying Torah and talking about people. Don't worry, not you. A knock on the door. We give our regal "enter" and in walks a familiar face, anxiously smiling, her head fully covered in a hijab, the traditional muslim head-covering for a woman. It was Rousoun, a 27-YO Syrian mother of three, a refugee, only in this country for about 5 months. And, she's our family. Rousan, Fayyez, her husband, and Hallha, Muhammed Nor, and Sham, their kids, are being sponsored and supported by Adas Israel and its refugee response team, as they integrate into the area.

But this day was special. It was Sham's first day of school. In the *dubim!* I had a son in the *dubim*. Anyone else here? And Rousoun, tough, smart, resilient, and also broken in so many of the way modern refugees experience, showed all of it on her face.

Could you have imagined a few years ago that our Gan would be teaching a 2-year old Syrian muslim child, alongside mine and yours, not as an outsider, but as a member of this community. That her mother would bring her first-day parent jitters straight to the rabbinic suite, where she would be greeted by two familiar faces, her rabbis, and spend 30 minutes talking through the complex emotions of it all? Neither did we.

In whom and in what do we have faith? In the expansive heartspace of this community and the resiliency of humanity.

5) Rabbi Holtzblatt: One day a Gan student had an unexpected seizure. Though her teacher was trained to deal with emergencies such as this, it was very hard to stay grounded while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Calvin, a beloved member of our maintenance crew, heard what was happening and showed up to the classroom. He sat side by side with the teacher, praying with her, calming her and helping her to stay grounded as they waited together for the paramedics.

The child arrived safely to the hospital, fully recovered, and the teacher later told us she got through that moment because of the strength Calvin gave her.

In whom and in what do we have faith? In a staff that sees the humanity in each other and provides support- standing shoulder to shoulder in order that we don't face hard moments alone.

6) Rabbi Alexander:

You may remember that toward the end of February and the beginning of March a number of Jewish cemeteries around the country were severely vandalized. Another wake-up call as to the kind of America we now live in. Adas Israel has a committee called Lev-BaLev - heart in Heart--or, Heart to Heart. A group of people specifically tasked with connecting our hearts to broken hearts, thus creating enmeshed and repaired hearts. The team, among other activities, write letters to those who have experienced traumas, both within and outside of the Jewish community. Lev Ba-Lev received this letter back from the Board of the Vaad Ha-Kollel Cemetery in Rochester after receiving several letters from our community: **Read letter:**

In whom and in what do we have faith? In the capacity of love, unsolicited love, even unrequited love, to provide light in darkness -- to heal a broken heart.

7) Rabbi Alexander

אמר רב יהודה בר שילא אמר רבי אסי אמר רבי יוחנן: ששה דברים אדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה, והקורן קיימת לו לעולם הבא. ואלו הן: (1) הכנסת אורחין, (2) וביקור חולים, (3) ועיון תפלה, (4) והשכמת בית המדרש, (5) והמגדל בניו לתלמוד תורה, (6) והדן את חברו לכף זכות.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 127a

in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: For six acts does a person gain not only the fruits of it in this world, but the principle endures for her in the world to come: 1) hospitality to guests, 2) visiting the sick, 3) introspective depth in prayer, 4) being early to the study house, 5) raising children to the study of Torah, and 6) giving one's fellow the benefit of the doubt.

The thing about lists is, well, everybody has a different list. Lists are individual and communal reflections of priority. The Talmud is full of lists. All kinds of lists. To-do lists. Grocery lists. Even menus. Lists of good laws, lists of great laws, list of minor laws and major laws. Lists of bad sins and lists of, well, even good sins. Yes, those exist.

But this list has an introduction that sets it apart. It's a list of actions for which there is a double reward. A here-and-now reward, and an eternal reward. Something unquantifiable.

Here's one way to put it: If you buy an apple in the store, you get the fruit of that transaction. You

enjoy it in this world. But if I drop by your house (not unannounced, don't worry) and give you an unexpected apple as a gift,.. well, for that, you get the tasty apple now, and the emotional memory of being cared for endures. Reverberates. Maybe even eternally. Tat's what this list is.

Eternal emotional reverberations.

Bringing in guests, visiting the sick, prayer from the heart, being generous of soul -- these acts surpass what one might have expected on a "important Jewish actions list". I mean, why isn't Shabbat there? Kashrut? Musaf? (Those things are important, of course!)

Our religion is one that measures religiosity not by how many prayers we say, or how fast we say them, not by how intensely scrupulous we are in every mitzvah. For us, for Judaism, being faithful means: How devoted and to whom? How kind and to whom? How much love and to whom?

In what do we have faith? In the capacious wisdom of the sacred religion we are here to honor tonight.

8) Rabbi Holtzblatt: Our theme this year is from the 58th chapter of the book of Isaiah. The verse says "Then like the dawn shall your light burst through and your healing will quickly appear"

אֲזַיִבְקַע כְּשַׁחַר אֹרֶךְ, וְאֶרְכָּתֶךָ מְהֵרָה תִצְמָח;

..... But the verse doesn't drop out of nowhere. It follows this verse.....

6 Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loosen the chains of injustice

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

"Then like the dawn shall your light burst through"

In other words, light is a consequence of kindness. Of love. Of justice. Of dignity.

And if you want to see light, to experience light, our tradition seems clear enough: shine yours on someone who is experiencing darkness. .

In that we have faith.