

Rabbi Oren J. Hayon  
Congregation Emanu El  
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125 years ago, when John Muir hiked through the American West, he roamed from the central coast of California to the northernmost ridge of Alaska, exploring mountains and forests and documenting what he saw.

On one of his walks in northern California, Muir wandered through a huge forest filled with one particular species of pine tree: the tuberculata, or knob-cone pine. The seeds of the tuberculata grow high in its upper branches, in distinctive thick clutches of tightly-packed pine cones. But Muir noticed something odd: Throughout that whole forest, there were no pine cones on the ground. Even stranger, the trees were all the same height and measured the same circumference around their trunks, indicating that they were all the same age.

Just as Muir was considering this curious set of facts, the sky above him darkened and the temperature dropped. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning exploded from the clouds right into that stand of knob-cone pines. One of them caught fire, and the blaze spread quickly across the timberline. As the heat surged, the sap on the trees softened and melted, the tightly-clenched pine cones splayed open, and all of them fell to the ground at the exact same moment.

Muir realized that the trees had learned to hold on to their seeds until the time was right, when the scrub-brush would burn away, making room for new saplings to grow. Awestruck, he marveled in his notebook that “all the seeds ripened during [the tree’s] whole life...had been carefully held in store for such a calamity. [A] young grove [will] immediately spring up, giving beauty for ashes.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, once again, those same forests are blackened and burned. Across the western United States, 3½ million acres of land, and thousands of homes and vehicles, have been consumed by fire. And those of us outside the devastation watch and wait, nurturing fragile hopes about what will emerge from the ashes.

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<sup>1</sup> I first encountered a version of this story, which was originally published in Muir’s *The Forests* (1894), in the 2005 book *Be Still and Get Going* (p. 203).

New life rises out of the dead matter on the forest floor: the same pattern follows every forest fire. But an element of mystery still remains: After the fire, no one really knows what will come back and what won't. We can't say with confidence what will burn off and perish, never to return; whether this fire will lead to permanent extinction or the joyful discovery of unexpected new growth.

We've lost so much over the past 6 months, and there is still so much uncertainty about the future. It has been difficult to take our first steps back into the world where some of our most familiar places have come to feel foreign and strange. We may need to dig deep to find the seeds of recovery. But we will find them and they will grow, endowing even our losses with holiness, giving beauty for ashes.

Tonight, the secrets of the year ahead still remain obscure. When will we know again the joy of reunion and reconnection, how much longer will we have to remain distant from each other? Over these past months, we have become newly acquainted with solitude, learning how to keep our own company and find comfort in silence. One of the thinkers I rediscovered while sheltering at home is the Catholic theologian Thomas Merton, whose writing from 75 years ago has become newly relevant today. Merton took vows as a Trappist monk and lived in a monastery in northern Kentucky, steeped in isolation and silence not for hours or days, but weeks and months on end. He wrote about the devotional practice of solitude, which shrinks the boundaries of the world down to one's own self. "The ears with which one hears the [spiritual] message are hidden in [one's] heart," he wrote, but they will "not hear anything unless they are favored with a certain interior solitude and silence."<sup>2</sup>

Being alone – whether in monastic retreat or medical quarantine – can help us identify who we really are. In that way, these past few months have provided an unexpected gift of preparation for the Days of Awe: the opportunity for self-reflection that leads to a sort of emptying-out of the self; pushing aside what is superfluous to find the clarified essence of our selves. Our task, in a sense, is to make of ourselves a burned forest in whose ashes are found the seeds of regrowth and healing. Only after the underbrush burns away can we see what is waiting to emerge from the stillness and silence below.

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<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts in Solitude* (1956), pp. xii-xiii.

The message that I want to share with you tonight is much simpler than the ones I have shared in any previous High Holy Day sermons. But to me, it is the most important reminder for us to carry into the new year. It is just this:

**We are going to be okay.**

Maybe it's too soon to say so. And I certainly don't want to diminish the grief and loss of the past year. Nor am I suggesting that our lives will go back to the way they used to be any time soon. But we are going to be okay, because we carry the seeds of recovery inside of us. Like the tuberculata pine cones waiting to open in the heat of the fire, some of our mightiest potential can be accessed after difficulty and struggle. Our liturgy's question about "what will be born, and what will die" challenges us to identify and uproot the things that block the sunlight and impede our growth. This new year, we will welcome those things that adapt to change, and bid farewell to the ones that have outlived their natural lifespan. This year we will recalibrate our relationships with family, neighbors, and friends.

We cannot let aloneness become isolation. We cannot ignore our human responsibilities and our obligation to care lovingly for others in this new year. Today I feel this truth powerfully: We need each other. It's strange to say on a computer screen, but I miss you. I miss seeing your faces and hearing about your successes and struggles in this place that means so much to all of us. Our relationships with each other provide fertile soil for our seeds to grow, and I know that we will see each other again soon.

I want to share one last story about solitude and fire. A story in the Book of Kings describes how Elijah the Prophet, fleeing from the evil king Ahab, took shelter in a cave. While he hid, a wildfire blazed up, raging outside the mouth of the cave. And after the fire subsided, the Bible says, Elijah heard a still, small voice.

After the fire, after the loss and disappointment, after all of the joys that have been diminished and the plans that have been deferred, after all of that, we can turn to find solace in the still small voice. It whispers about the seeds of renewal nestled inside of us. It reassures us that uncertainty is not tragedy; that fear can be turned into curiosity, and cynicism into wonder. After the fire, we listen with new openness to the voice of God, to the voice that speaks most honestly in our heart of hearts.

Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not alone.<sup>3</sup> We are accompanied by God, by our ancestors, by the countless unnamed sources of strength that help us lift when things feel too heavy. The most important part of that psalm is its reminder that even when we find ourselves deep inside it, we are walking through the valley of the shadow, and we will make it to the other side.

We have made our home in a burning forest. We have wondered despairingly if the flames would ever subside. But a forest is not an object, it is a process: always dynamic and eternally becoming. And so are we. Even when we are gripped by tragedy and upheaval, we can summon our creativity and courage to grow upward and pass through.<sup>4</sup> Every ending provides nourishment for a new beginning.

The year now ended was unlike any other in our memory, a year of sadness and loss that burned as it passed by, but we have survived and tonight we begin again. And we are going to be okay. Even when the forest around us looks charred and lifeless, the seeds of rebirth are lying dormant just beneath the surface, patiently waiting to be liberated by flame, readying themselves – as we ready ourselves – to give beauty for ashes.

*Shana tovah u-metukah.* May it be a good and sweet and healthy year for us all.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a beautiful passage on p. 119 of in Richard Nelson's *The Island Within* (1989).