INTRODUCTION

Friends, we have arrived at the eve of the New Year. As a people, we have been at this place many times before. In fact, this is the five thousand seven-hundred and seventy-sixth Rosh Hashanah.

As we gather together on the threshold of the New Year, we wonder, how should we receive it? The New Year is perhaps a hopeful time, a time of new beginnings, but precisely because of that it is also a time of uncertainty. The future is as yet unwritten, and who knows what perils lie before us?

In 1978, Karl Wallenda, the patriarch of the famous Wallenda family, set out across a wire that stretched between two hotel towers in San Juan Puerto Rico. Gusts of wind buffeted him as he inched alone, his balance pole in hand. The uncertain undulations of the high towers made the wire dance beneath his feet. He had made similar trips across taut wires thousands of times before and often under just such difficult conditions, but this would be his last attempt. With fingers still holding onto the pole, he fought for balance, but all of his efforts could not prevent his tumbling down.

Just so, we have ventured out onto the high wire many times, facing many new years, holding on as best we can to our balance poles. But who knows whether this time, this year, the winds will be too strong and the wire too unsteady?

There are certainly many reasons to be apprehensive of what lies ahead. We look around us, and we see many desert places in our world:

- One desert is the world opinion about Israel. Israel seems to be losing friends and support around the world. The Boycott and Divest movement is alive and well, not only on most college campuses, or in European markets, but in anti-Israel resolutions passed by two national churches.

  When the well-attended “South by Southwest” – an international mecca for artists and innovators in Austin TX, planned a series of exhibits and events on technology in Israel, protestors carried signs reading, “Keep South by Southwest Creative, not criminal: Don’t Whitewash Israel’s War Crimes.”
• Another desert is global anti-Semitism. We watched on television this year, with horror, Jewish families fleeing Paris by the thousands, unable to stay in their homes and synagogues.

Global anti-Semitism has increased dramatically between this Rosh Hashanah and last, with 766 hateful acts against Jewish schools, synagogues, and community centers this year.

• And there is the desert of the crisis of refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the region – it is the most pressing refugee crisis since World War II. We are pained and challenged by the millions of refugees worldwide including the plight of the more than eleven million Syrian refugees who have been forced to flee their homes because of ongoing violence.

• Another desert is the nation of Iran. We are in the midst of a major national debate about how to end the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Iran.

Whether you support or oppose the agreement on the table, we are all cautious and uncertain and petrified about the world’s leading terrorist nation amassing billions of dollars that could fund Hamas and Hezbolah in the coming year.

• Yet another desert is violence in our nation. Here at The Temple – we formed an interfaith group to look at common sense policies for gun safety. And still, a disillusioned man walked into a church in Charleston, firing bullets at congregants in study and prayer.

And, we have watched incident after incident of disenfranchisement of the African American community. And we wonder, what progress have we really made in the year that has passed?

The easiest thing to do is to become discouraged by the deserts that are in our lives. We are surrounded on every side by tragedy, trouble, misfortune, and discouragement.

Deserts. Deserts fill our world, stalk our streets and sting our spirit. Deserts kill our joy and dash our hope.

**Way I: Retreat from the past year and ignore the future**
Since we don’t want to face the deserts of the New Year, some of us approach it in fear. We turn away and try to escape to a gentler, friendlier sense of the past. We pull the covers over our heads and retreat to a former time when life was good.

One member of The Temple shared with me last week, “Rabbi, I’m coming to services, but reluctantly not because I don’t find the liturgy, music and sermons meaningful but because I’m afraid to start another year.” All of us, to some extent, share that sentiment. The last year was such a mess – why not resist entering the New Year?

Jonah resisted the new on his way to Nineveh. God called him to preach to the city of Ninevah, to imagine a new possibility of repentance for that city. But instead of facing the task God asked him to do, he went to the lower level of the ship, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Jonah’s way is often our way. We are afraid of the new, afraid of the future, so we play hide and seek with God, unwilling to face the difficult tasks that lie before us. But, Jonah came to learn that while you can run, you can’t hide from God.

**Way II: forget the past and embrace the future**

Others of us face the New Year more boldly, maybe even with foolish optimism. We say, “Forget the past and seize the future!”

As self-help guru Steve Maraboli advises, “Forget yesterday. It’s already forgotten you.”

We are gamblers. We too, are troubled by the world around of us. But for those of us who are risk takers – the way for us is not going backwards to the past – it is heading off, wildly into the future. Instead of pulling the covers over our heads and hiding – we throw the covers off the bed and shout to the world, “whatever is coming next year has to be better than this year!” We thank God that there is something new so that we can put the past year in a bottle and throw it away.

We even find this impulse to forget the past in the popular Disney movie “Frozen.” Princess Elsa, paralyzed by a painful past, finally decides to break free. As her song says, she decides to “Let it go.” She sings:

*It’s funny how some distance  
Makes everything seem small  
And the fears that once controlled me  
Can’t get to me at all*
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me,
I'm free!

Let it go, let it go

But to think we can completely “let it go,” to think that we can entirely escape the past is foolish and unrealistic. Not only that, to pretend that we don’t have a past is to lose our memory, to lose something essential about us, to lose our very selves.

The novelist and essayist Walker Percy, in his book *Lost in the Cosmos* points to the abundance of movies and television shows with recurrent themes of amnesia. Here we find so many characters who cannot remember the past. Percy wonders why the character who can forget the past entirely, is so compelling to us. He says it is because we are tired of our lives, tired of ourselves, and would like to lose them. It’s the feeling that everything – work, marriage, family, politics, religion, social life – is disappointing.

For these people, the allure is that the future is a way to have a complete overcome of the past – to be something or someone they were not before, and yet, how empty it is to have no memory at all. Retreating, ignoring, and dashing blindly into the future never have been the Jewish way.

| Way III: Isaiah’s Way |

It is the prophet Isaiah who shows us a third way, the Jewish way, neither fearfully closing our eyes to the future nor foolishly trying to run away from the past. And it is Isaiah’s way into the New Year that I want to explore with you this evening.

Now, Isaiah was no Pollyanna. He was brutally honest about the past. He was a sixth century BCE prophet, who lived and preached when the people of God were divided into two kingdoms, north and south. The northern kingdom had already turned its back on God – moral depravation, political corruption, social injustice, and spiritual idolatry….you name it. And the southern kingdom was headed down the same path. As a people, we had messed up royally. Isaiah knew Israel’s past, and it wasn’t pretty. It was a desert. And Isaiah was also honest about the future. He knew it was always uncertain. The future is like a foggy canyon. No one can see the way ahead.
So, Isaiah spoke to the Jewish people right at the point that they were poised between a painful past and an uncertain future which is precisely where we are tonight, poised between the painful old year and the uncertain New Year.

And this is what Isaiah told them…

"Remember not the former things, don’t consider the things of old. Behold, God will do a new thing; now shall it spring forth… God will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert."

Now at first Isaiah may sound like Princess Elsa: “Let it go! Let it go! Don’t remember the past. Let it go because God is doing a new thing in the future!” But Isaiah is no Princess Elsa. Look again; look closely, at his words. What is the new thing that God is going to do in the future? God is going to make “rivers in the desert”…. “rivers in the desert.” Do you see what that image is? It is a reverse of the image of the Exodus. When God liberated the Jewish people from slavery, he parted the Red Sea so that they could escape the Egyptian army. In other words, God made a path in the sea for them, dry land in the water. But now, Isaiah promises, God is about to make water in the dry land, to make “rivers in the desert.” The God who liberated us in the past by making a path in the sea is about to liberate us again in the future— but in a new way, by making water in the dry land. Isaiah is telling us that the very same God we have experienced in the past – the God who made dry land in the water – is the God who will be with us in the future, but doing something new – making water in the dry land. What Isaiah is teaching us on this eve of the New Year is that the most important thing we should take from our past is: our faith…

…Our faith that the Jewish people will endure, our faith in the God who saves and preserves us. What we can let go and leave behind is the baggage from the past, the part that keeps us stuck in negative patterns. And when we take our faith with us and leave the baggage behind, then we can enter the future with hope, because the God who was our God in the past will be our God in the future. But now, God will do something new.

To understand this teaching, take the example of the parents of a teenage girl who tell her that because of a wonderful new job opportunity, the family will be moving next month from Atlanta to California. Finding her world turned upside down, the girl has three possible responses:

The first way – like Jonah:
“I don’t want to go! All my friends are here. I hate California – you are ruining my life!”

The second way – like the Princess Elsa:
“This is cool. I never really liked it here. I can’t wait to get to California where I can make a new life for myself and forget the old one.”

And then there is the Isaiah way:
“I don’t know what California is going to be like. I’m really scared. But my parents have made a good life for me here, and I trust them. I don’t know what lies ahead. I just know it will be new and different. And I know my parents and how much they love me. The future is uncertain, but I have faith that my parents will be there with me and I will make my way.”

Isaiah puts a new song in our mouths tonight.
*Because of God*, says Milton Steinberg, *it is possible for us to clasp the world – but with relaxed hands to embrace it but with open arms. Because we are people of faith, we can let the desert of the past go and find a new way.*

Consider a desert of our past, right here at The Temple. Who would have imagined, this summer 100 years ago, that Leo Frank would have been lynched by an angry mob in Marietta after the false accusation of murdering young Mary Phagan?

In that terrible time, God made a path in the sea. God did not let us go!

Today, because of Leo Frank – we have the Anti-Defamation League. Leo’s story is about survival against the odds. It is about our desire to teach Torah and pass it on to the next generation. It is about our responsibility to bring a profound message of faith and hope into the larger world. That is our faith here at The Temple. And because of that faith, we can turn to the new things that we will do in the future in partnership with God.

What I am suggesting is that rather than be stuck in the past, that God is calling us to look and see what God is doing right now and, in turn, what we can do to achieve positive change. Too many churches and synagogues are dying today because they are stuck on the old ways of doing things and aren’t spending time trying to find where God is now. That is not The Temple way. Our is to always be looking for God today and tomorrow.

For others, the desert can be found in the nation.

This year, thousands clung to the past expressed in the Confederate Battle Flag – a symbol that resonates with past history but in our contemporary society is a symbol of hatred and slavery. As people of faith, we can let that negativity go and be open to change.
We can move to a place of hope – the place God is taking us.

With our faith in God to guide us, we can open ourselves to new ways to confront the issues of our time – whether it be the abundance of gun violence in our society, race relations, the growth of anti-Semitism, the refugee crisis, or the very real and existential threat of a nuclear Iran.

We cannot ignore, neither can we jump into quick solutions. Rather, by affirming our faith, we can take lessons from the past, let go of old ways, and be open to find our generations water in the desert. And we each approach this season with our personal deserts, too. For some, it is caring for spouses and loved ones who are ill. Alzheimer’s or cancer or mental illness consume and paralyze us. Others are unemployed or underemployed or unsure of what they want to do or be. How many of us would like to have a fresh start? A fresh start to marriage or family, to finances or work? Just a fresh start in life? Setbacks and failures have caused much heart ache and pain, guilt and iniquity…. that burden the soul, quench our passion, and delay our dreams.

What Isaiah is saying is that God is with us tonight, in the midst of our pain and predicament.

So tonight, if you are stuck in stubbornness or inflexibility, because we have faith – let your stubbornness go. If you are holding onto past hurts and pains, because we have faith, let your resentment go. If you are holding on to something that doesn’t belong to you and was never intended for you, because we have faith, let your possessiveness go. If someone can’t treat your right, love you back, and see your worth, because we have faith, let that relationship go. If you have a habit that negatively impacts your health, because we have faith, let that addiction go. If you have thoughts of hatred, because we have faith, let that revenge go. If you keep assessing others too harshly to make yourself feel better, because we have faith, let that judgement go. In 5776, if you are stuck in the past while God is trying to take you to a new place, let it go.

Tomorrow, you can either wake up and say: “Good Morning God” or you can say, “Good, God, Morning.”

CONCLUSION:

This is what God does for us, in the New Year. God helps us to use the imagery of the past year to make our way into the New Year. God helps us turn our desert into a river. God has water to pour onto our thirsty souls. God is still saying: Don’t consider the things of old. Don’t stunt your future. Make the past a springboard, a launching pad for tomorrow.
Tonight, Israel is being called to trust God about the future – not on blind faith – but because of our experience of God’s actions and character through the Exodus in the past.

We know venturing out is still very scary – so God is saying that we should not expect an exact repetition of the past – be open to new solutions that lie ahead.

Rosh Hashanah marks the spiritual New Year. It calls upon us to welcome in the new, by remembering and then letting go of the old. Yesterday, we grasped and clung and refused to let go. In the New Year, may we begin to regain our spiritual balance that gives meaning and sweetness to our days.

Amen.