Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781 | September 2020

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“Targets”

Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom

Jewish tradition tells us that the gates of heaven are open wide and will remain so for the next 10 days. As Rosh Hashanah begins, I imagine the orange and red hues of sunset shining through those open gates. I can picture the blues and purples of dusk giving way to a starlit sky that goes on forever.

That image of the open gates of heaven stands in stark contrast to the reality of our world right now - a world whose doors and gates and windows have been shuttered for much of this year.

We are living in a time of isolation. When the celebration of grand moments in our lives had to be altered or cancelled.

We are living in times when the people most in need of visits and human contact are often cut off from the exact thing they crave.

Our holiday tables have not been as crowded as they once were.

And our sacred space – this sanctuary in which I stand, has not been full for a very long time.

Last year at this time, on Rosh Hashanah, I saw so many of you in person, and I could sense the hope inside of our hearts for a good and sweet New Year.

Just one year ago, there was not even the slightest shred of doubt in my mind that we would return to this very place the following year to celebrate in person once again.

There are likely very few of us who ended up where we thought we would be on this Rosh Hashanah.

I am a big believer that each of us has agency in our own lives. So usually on the High Holidays, I set goals for myself. I picture where I will be in a year from now and I think of all the actions which will be required of me to get me there.

At the end of the year, if I fell short of my goals, if I'm not where I wanted to be physically, emotionally, or spiritually, the first direction I look, is inward. What have I done, what behaviors did I pick up, what habits did I create, that led me to fall short of my goals?

Even in a year like this, I still believe that we have influence over where we wind up in life. But 5780 has been an important reminder that while we can control a great deal, we can’t control it all.

In this past year of 5780, many of us have suffered loss like people do every year. But this past year was profoundly different. Human beings always encounter grief, irritability, anger, and sadness. But
this year we were unable to fully control how we coped with such feelings. We had no choice but to be more isolated than we would have wanted to be in such trying times.

The same is true of our grandest moments. Graduations, promotions at work, baby namings, Bnai Mitzvah, and weddings - So many big life moments - achievements we had envisioned years in advance, that just a year ago seemed to be right on track - now were completely altered or cancelled all together. Our ancient tradition has a word for moments like these - both the good and bad moments when the reality was different than what we were striving for. That word is “Chet.”

If you look up the word “Chet” in the Hebrew English dictionary, you will find the English words “sin or transgression.” You may have even in your lifetime described part of the high holidays in this way “Oh yes, Yom Kippur – the day we atone for our chata’im - our sins.”

But this is a case when a key element of a Hebrew word - “Chet” - gets lost in translation. In English, when we think of sin or transgression, we have a negative association. We have associations of guilt and shame.

But in the Hebrew, “Chet”, at least in its origins, is less associated with these emotions. The Hebrew root of Chet - spelled with the letters “Chet, Tet, Alef” is actually an archery term. It means to miss the target.

Just as an archer aims for the bull’s eye but does not always hit the target, so too, for thousands of years, the Jewish people have aimed to hit our targets.

But there is no shame in missing the mark. Jewish tradition anticipates that we will miss. So each year, we have these Days of Awe, to reevaluate and try again.

10 days from now, when we confess our “sins” and say our “Al Chets” there is a custom of making a fist and beating our chests. For those who follow this ritual, our fist makes contact with our chest as we say

“AI CHET Sh’Chatanu lefaniecha”... “for this SIN we have committed before you...”

But this year, the last thing we need is to beat ourselves up even more about all the ways in which we missed the bull’s eye. Because let’s face it, so much of it was not our fault so much of this is not in our control.

So every year, but this year in particular, I want to encourage you, if you follow this ritual, that instead of beating your chest, you might come to see this exercise as more of a massage of the heart. Sure, maybe we need a little klunk once in a while to remind us that we should try to be less irritable, to be more patient, or to be more mindful of others. But this year, we as a community, and we as a world, are in deep need of rachamim – compassion - as we begin the year 5781.
We are in need of compassion because this brand new year is one in which we are going to mourn. We will mourn the loss of loved ones, and we will mourn the loss of goals we tried to achieve. We will mourn the loss of routines that we took for granted. The perfect sports season, or the habit of sitting in your favorite coffee shop. The big role in the school play, or walking your child all the way to their classroom at drop-off. Senior prom, a dream vacation, or even getting together with friends and family – we have to let go of these things for now.

We have to become comfortable with where we are, and who we have to be in this moment – we must do this for ourselves and for others.

Otherwise, once the gates of heaven close, and we hear the sound of the shofar, we are in danger of spending all of 5781 lamenting where we are NOT, instead of accepting where we are.

There is a story about "Rabbi Jacob Kranz (1740-1804), known as the Maggid of Dubno. He was famous for his parables. He was once asked how his stories always hit the proverbial bull's-eye. The Maggid answered that there are two ways to be a great archer. One way is to set up the target, aim, shoot, and hit it. But one needs to have a rare skill for that. What the great Maggid did, he said, was first he would shoot the arrow. Then he would find where the arrow landed, and paint the target around the arrow. That way he always hit the bulls-eye. For the Maggid of Dubno, this is how he was able to articulate such amazing stories. First he identified the parable – the lesson he wanted to teach. Then he would paint a story around the parable.¹

Last year, at this time, so many of us were poised to be the archer with the rare skill. For many of us, the world was such that we were able to set our target wherever we wanted, and then we would shoot towards that very spot, with a high likelihood of accuracy.

But here we are, one year later. And so much has changed. This year, it is time to embrace the skill of the great Magid of Dubno.

The arrows that took flight towards our targets last year needed to make emergency landings – not only did they miss the bull’s eye, they were forced to miss the target all together. Our arrows are in the ground. With the original target out of sight.

So what are we going to do? Will we lament our chattaim? Will we bemoan our inability to reach our targets? Or will we begin to paint our bull’s eyes around the arrows? This is not the year for beating our chests. This is not the year for affliction. We’ve had enough of that. This year, we should massage our hearts. This is the moment when we find meaning and purpose in the places where our arrows have landed.

¹ Jewishhistory.org
I have the privilege to be alongside so many of you in your most joyous and most difficult moments, and I know that so many of us at Beth Or are goal driven people. I know that many of you have built your lives setting targets and hitting the bull’s eye dead on, time after time.

So, for a moment, I want to talk to you, the goal setters. Building a target around where the arrow has landed is not taking the easy way out. Nor is this a call to throw in the towel this year. In fact, it is a call for us to get to work. And Jewish History can serve as our inspiration.

So many pillars of Jewish tradition are actually targets beautifully crafted around unexpected fallen arrows.

The Babylonian Talmud – the work upon which Jewish law is based, was the creation of a community exiled from the land of Israel. Babylon was not their target. But they made it a center of learning and culture.

Another example of this is the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem. When the Temple fell, the sacrificing of animals as a way of worshipping God came to a halt. It must have felt to those ancient Israelites that their connection to God was completely severed.

While prayer existed in some forms before that point, our prayer services today are a creation that was born out of the reality of being unable to sacrifice animals anymore. Our prayer services today are mapped onto those ancient sacrificial practices in many ways. Once again, surrounding an arrow that missed a target, something beautiful was created.

Fast forwarding two thousand years or so, Theodor Herzl’s dream of building a Jewish nation-state did not come out of thin air. His dream was born out of the realization that the Jews who aimed for the target of full integration into European culture might hit the target, but would never hit the bull’s eye. Herzl assessed, almost prophetically in the late 1800’s, that no matter how much the Jews of Europe behaved, spoke, and ate like their neighbors, they would never be fully accepted or fully safe. The magnificent project that is the State of Israel was a target built around an arrow that missed the bull’s eye of assimilation into European culture.

Throughout History, the Jewish people have been archers shooting towards our targets. We hit some targets along the way, and we missed some too. And while so much of Jewish history is about great achievement, remember that some of the biggest and most beautiful projects came from missing the bull’s eye.

It was never about taking the easy way out. It was about recovering from a difficult moment, accepting it, and striving towards something new. It is so fitting that this Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbat because there is a line in Lecha Dodi – the famous Shabbat poem – that perfectly summarizes this mindset which is so ingrained in the Jewish consciousness, and is so crucial to us at this moment.
“Rav Lach Shevet B’Emek HaBacha.” “Long enough you have dwelt in the valley of tears.” The phrase is not telling us we aren’t allowed to mourn. But it’s saying that we can’t dwell there forever. Missing the target is part of life. But there is no shame or guilt in that. Especially when it is under circumstances out of our control. There is great pride to be found in aiming and missing, so long as we show resilience and build our new bull’s eyes. Through this process, amazing things can happen.

One of the gifts and beauties of being an American Jew, is that whenever I find a piece of inspiration in Jewish text, there’s always a parallel to be found in American History – and a bonus for me is that this story is a part of baseball lore as well.

A person once told the following story:

“When I was a small boy in Kansas, a friend of mine and I went fishing and as we sat there in the warmth of the summer afternoon on a river bank, we talked about what we wanted to do when we grew up. I told him that I wanted to be a real major league baseball player, a genuine professional like Honus Wagner. My friend said that he’d like to be President of the United States. Neither of us got our wish.”

The person who told that story was a man by the name of Dwight D. Eisenhower – the 34th President of the United States

If we hit all of our targets in life, we probably are setting the targets too close. If we hit none of our targets, it may be a sign that we need to make our goals a bit more attainable. And if we are setting our goals just right, we are all the more likely to have some successes each year, but we are also likely to fail. We are likely to commit “CHATTAM.” We are likely to miss our targets. We instinctively know what to do when we hit our targets. We celebrate. But the question of this year is, what will we do with those arrows that have fallen short? Especially given that they fell by no fault of our own.

May we all have the bravery in 5781 to honestly assess where our arrows have landed and may we have the strength to find beauty in these difficulties. May we have the courage in 5781 to paint new targets. May we create meaning, and find fulfillment, exactly where we are.

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