

**Rabbi Jonathan A. Schnitzer**

## **First Evening of Rosh Hashanah**

**18 September 2020**

### **Hope in the Era of Corona**

Shanah tovah u'metukah – a good and sweet year for all of us...and Shabbat Shalom to each of you! How deeply grateful I am to be here this evening as we inaugurate a New Year. It is the first time that I have been at a B'nai Israel service in 6 months—and can you believe, it is also the first time in 6 months that I have actually worn a suit... sweats, shorts and sandals being my more typical garb in our corona-era... My thanks to my colleague and friend, Rabbi Michael Safra, for the invitation to speak tonight. I cherish the relationship which has been ours over the course of now 18 years.

My father was born in Philadelphia on January 25, 1918—the year of the influenza pandemic that swept America and the world with ferocity. Philadelphia was a “hotspot” for the disease. As a baby, my dad became so extremely ill with influenza that he was not expected to survive. Family lore has it that his parents even spread a Tallit over his carriage-thinking erroneously that he had stopped breathing. Fortunately, they were wrong—my dad pulled through—and went on to a long and very productive life.

Fast forward 102 years—and it is our era: 2020. When we convened here at B'nai Israel last Rosh Hashanah, who among us could have imagined in our wildest dreams what we have now experienced. To take a little liberty with Judith Viorst's classic children's book title: 2020 has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year. The three "P's" of 2020: the pandemic—politics—and protests have cast a palpable layer of stress, fear and uncertainty over all of us. No one has been exempted.

Amid the unique vocabulary of 2020 that all of us have acquired: "Social distancing", "PPE", "Virtual", "Zoom", "Live stream", I learned another new word: "gobsmack". Webster defines "gobsmack" as "being overwhelmed, utterly astounded." All of us have been "gobsmacked" by the events of 2020.

In different ways, we are all un-moored. Let's just ponder for a moment how many are suffering from loss of employment, economic turmoil, food insecurity, illness, the death of a loved one. All over America, homes have become classrooms—with parents trying to balance their own commitments, as they help their children navigate through these unprecedented circumstances. And even if we have been spared some of these more specific challenges, we are all struggling with loneliness,

frustration, anger, anxiety, depression. Our world—at least the one that was familiar to us—has been up-ended.

It would be easy to succumb to despair. And yet, the crises of 2020 have also evoked deeply noble, altruistic responses: those on the front lines in health care, education, at the supermarket, on the delivery trucks and in the network of institutions that sustain our society—just to cite a few examples.

I have also been repeatedly impressed by the surge of intense creativity during 2020 in many spheres of our Jewish community—not just in maintaining the status quo but in a more fundamental and dramatic re-thinking and re-positioning—to touch our hearts and minds in new ways.

Yes, there is a pandemic—but human beings are reaching out to each other with kindness and compassion—our Jewish community is functioning differently but with remarkable vitality—and if that were not enough, there is also a re-awakened quest for racial justice in our ever-more diverse American society.

So... in spite of everything that suggests gloom, I am hopeful—and hope is at the core of our High Holy Day season. This is the moment for a personal re-boot for each of us—so that we can look ahead with courage, determination, resilience, confidence, faith and love... in spite.

In Alenu, the prayer with which we conclude every service of our Jewish year... morning, afternoon, evening, Shabbat, Yom Tov, we say: Al ken n'kaveh l'cha... We hope for the day when the world will be a better reflection of all that is just and right... and even more than that, we pledge to work towards those goals.

When the Zionists came to Palestine at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century--it was a swampy, mosquito-infested terrain--they named one of their first settlements: Petach Tikvah—The Door of Hope.

What is the anthem of the state of Israel? Hatikvah—the Hope—with these stirring words... Od lo avdah tikvateynu--Our hope is not lost... the hope of 2000 years.

As we embark on our New Year, we know, to be sure, that some very tough days are still before us.

But let's look, in conclusion, at one of the most powerful passages in our Bible. It is part of the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah. It describes a low point in Jewish history, as the prophet Jeremiah envisions the captive Judeans on the road to faraway Babylonia. They are bereft: Jerusalem and their Temple had just been destroyed, their lives uprooted, the days ahead fraught with dangers. As the exiles pass the tomb of the matriarch Rachel, she can be heard weeping for her unfortunate children.

And what is Jeremiah's response to Mother Rachel?

"Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping—

Your eyes from shedding tears... for (your children) shall return from your enemy's land"...and here is the key phrase... "Yesh tikvah l'acharitech--

And there is hope--tikvah--for your future." (Jeremiah 31:16-17)

From our ancestors to us...let that message of unrelenting hope be our strength in the New Year ahead.