

**Rosh HaShana 5783  
September 26, 2022  
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***Audacious Curiosity and Courageous Openness***

I was in a seminar over the summer and the teacher directed us to a fascinating obituary from a few years ago<sup>1</sup>. It paid tribute to a man named Mario Zacchini, a circus performer who was one of nine children. He was the last of this circus family to die and was considered “the last surviving member of the original generation of human cannonballs”. The obituary contained his favorite description of what he did: “Flying isn’t the hard part; landing in the net is.”

In a different vein, I offer the classic teaching of Maimonides, the twelfth century sage, who taught about Rosh HaShana and the use of the shofar: Awake, you sleepers, from your slumber...examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times Obituary, February 3, 1999

A modern framing of this teaching<sup>2</sup> offers this: “The shofar sounds and I am awake. Shaken out of the daze of sleep, I see the truth. The Day of Judgment approaches. Soon we will stand before the One who can’t be flattered or fooled. Soon we will stand in the courtroom of the conscience. Soon we will know the joy of beginning again.”

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We are all being launched into this brand new year. We don’t have a choice about it. And there’s no net! We have been shaken awake and there is tremendous uncertainty about what we will experience and where we will land. As I commented in one of our pre High Holy Day learning sessions: 354 brand new, unblemished, and undefined days lie ahead. None of the days of this new year have been determined yet.

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<sup>2</sup> Mishkan HaLev, CCAR Press Selichot Prayerbook, page 90

My great concern is that the foundation for this new year is so incredibly shaky. The events of this past year have shaken so many of us to the core. We are living in a time of toxic polarization, impatience and intolerance. So many live in such a homogeneous environment, a self-fulfilling bubble, that they are never in relationship with anyone with a different point of view. Or if they do engage with someone with a different opinion (think Facebook!), so often they do so with venom and rage.

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I saw a picture once: two people standing with a numeral on the ground in between them. The first stated “It’s a 6”. The other said, “It’s a 9!” And so it went, back and forth, back and forth...how could you possibly think that?!? You are wrong and I can’t even understand how you even have that idea! How can you not see what I am seeing?!?”

I know I am far from alone. I arrive at this new year feeling an incredible weight and a tremendous sadness. The continued presence of covid isolates us and creates a pervasive uncertainty. Rights to health care and the protection of bodily autonomy, safety for Black Americans, and opportunities to escape poverty are all severely limited. Voting rights are threatened. The news brings us regular accounts of antisemitism and white supremacy. The war in Ukraine has raged for seven months. And, closest to home, Rochester has witnessed nearly 60 homicides this year...and there have only been 38 weeks in the year.

There continue to be grave threats to the lofty aspiration found in the Pledge of Allegiance, that there will be “liberty and justice for all”. All of these examples I offer are symptoms of the pervasive and insidious divisiveness that is present in every corner of our society, a toxic and dangerous polarization that has so many dug into their own corner, tearing down those of other identities and perspectives.

I did not want to begin this High Holy Day season with such a lament. However, I feel a responsibility to raise my voice and initiate a reflection. How can we respond? How can we inject positivity into the world?

We are launching into this brand new year. We can't change the foundation on which we stand, but we can work to make sure we will create new realities before the new year is complete.

On this Rosh HaShana day, we can and must see the potential in this new year. The Book of Life for 5782 may be filed on the library shelf in the horror section, but the Book for 5783 is filled with blank pages. We carry the memories and the knowledge of the old year with us, but we must not be limited by those experiences.

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Think again of that picture I described, the two people, standing on opposite sides of the number 6/9. They can tear each other apart, not budging from their view and not understanding how the other person isn't seeing what they see. Or, they can take just a few small steps and change their perspective. This can be a year where we shift...where we move...where we seek to reposition ourselves and understand something different.

A great deal of commentary has been offered that the Hebrew word for year, *Shana*, comes from the same root as the word *Shinui*: change. Rosh HaShana is not just “the head of the year” or “New Year’s Day”. Figuratively and significantly, it can be understood as “*Rosh Hashinui*”...the start of the change.

This holy day is a special kind of gateway. Will we retreat or will we cross over?

My prayer is that this will be a year when we recognize and act on the potential that is implanted within each one of us: to grow, to learn, and to change. My prayer is that this will be a year when we cultivate an attitude of audacious curiosity, when we nurture a courageous stance of openness to those of diverse opinions and identities.

I read a remarkable memoir of a man named Martin Greenfield.<sup>3</sup> He was an Auschwitz survivor who became a successful and prominent tailor, including working on suits for a number of presidents.

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<sup>3</sup> Measure of a Man: From Auschwitz Survivor to Presidents’ Tailor by Martin Greenfield with Wynton Hall.

He tells a story in two parts of his encounters with Rabbi Herschel Schacter.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Schacter was the first chaplain to enter the concentration camps, and was involved in the liberation of Buchenwald.

On April 20, 1945, Rabbi Schacter conducted the very first Shabbat service in Buchenwald. Martin was at that service and the next day, he came up to the rabbi and said, “I must know. Where was God?” The rabbi stood still and silent. Young Martin continued: “Look what happened! Where was God? Where?”

Rabbi Schacter responded, “There are no answers to certain questions. That is a question for which there is no answer.” Martin lowered his head and cried. Rabbi Schacter wrapped his arms around him and held him.

Part two of the story takes place forty years later, in 1985. Martin had a front row seat to the dedication of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

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<sup>4</sup> A biography of Rabbi Schacter, entitled Rabbi of Buchenwald, was published in 2021

As the ceremony began with a rabbi addressing the assembly, Martin turned to his wife and whispered, “I know that rabbi from somewhere!” The rabbi continued speaking. He explained that he had witnessed the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust firsthand as a chaplain in the U.S. Third Army, which liberated Buchenwald. And then the rabbi told a story: about how after the liberation, a young boy came to him and asked him a question he could not answer: “Where was God?”

After the ceremony, Martin went up to Rabbi Schacter and introduced himself. As he describes it: “standing there at the Holocaust Museum dedication, which had become a Buchenwald reunion, with tears streaming down our faces, all we could do was hold onto each other. I didn’t want to let go of him. He didn’t want to let go either. To experience once again that connection, to stand with the man who had held me as a boy when my spirit had been shattered by the Nazis and their lust for death and darkness—I felt as though I’d been kissed by an angel.”

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The story is a reminder: in times of darkness, we have the ability to create light. We can hold onto those whose spirits have been shattered and offer them a pathway to healing. In times of division, we have the ability to create understanding and cooperation. We can and must be angels and actors that do not accept toxicity and polarization in our community, in our country, and in our world.

Today is *Rosh HaShinui*, the beginning of the change. Today is a day to resolve that we will be audacious in our curiosity and courageous in our openness. This must be a year when we are unflinching in our resolve to put an end to the lines of division that are causing so much trauma.

Whatever labels, whatever adjectives, whatever identities we carry...and may we wear them with pride...I hope that this will be a year when our connections and conversations cross those lines. I will help create those opportunities at temple and with our partners in the community.

We have launched into this new year. We can't sit still and ask "Where is God to solve all the problems?" And, we can't simply ignore the challenges and wait for others to change their ways.

Instead, may we embrace the remarkable possibility that this can be a year of healing and peacemaking. The truth is that we are flying without a net. The stakes are too high and the consequences too grave. Join me in the promise that we will work together this year to answer willful ignorance with intentional curiosity. Together, let us become role models for that great American charge: united we stand, divided we fall. May this new year include the essential proposition that we can and will change...and grow...and not rest until there is unity and equality across our community. May God bless us with the wisdom and strength to make this so.