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Waking Up to a Brand New Year

Shana Tova! Even as we gather in this unprecedented way, I am grateful for all of you have come to begin the new year of 5781. We may not be sitting together in our sanctuary, but we are joined together in powerful and important ways.

When I was in Poland last fall, I learned the incredible story of Auschwitz survivor Haskel Tydor. In January 1945, Tydor and thousands of others were forced on the infamous "Death March". As he was leaving, he was approached by an emaciated prisoner, who handed him a small object wrapped in a rag. The man said to Tydor, "Take it. I'm too sick to survive. Maybe you will make it. Take this shofar. Show them that we had a shofar in Auschwitz."

Tydor did survive and kept the shofar with him. On Rosh HaShana 1945, Tydor was on a boat, just off shore from the city of Haifa and the Carmel mountains. Incredibly, with the memory of everything they had experienced, he recited the *shehechianu* and blew the shofar.

One of the first blessings of this holiday, and all special occasions in Jewish life, is the *Shehechianu*...Thank you, God, for giving us life, sustaining us, and bringing us to this sacred occasion. We recited it last night as we lit the candles and we'll say it at other points in our service, including when we first hear the sound of the shofar.

While not as dramatic as what the survivors experienced, with everything that transpired during the old year, we might have a particular view of this prayer: Thank God we made it! Thank God that year is done.

And that's not unreasonable.

But, our tradition has a different blessing to be recited when one has survived. In ancient times, when travel was more perilous, it would have been recited after every arduous journey. It can also be recited when one has survived an accident or illness or other danger.

The blessing doesn't name the danger. Rather, it says *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, shegimalanu kol tov*...Blessed are You God, who has bestowed every goodness upon us.

In a way, that can be paraphrased to say "Thank you God for letting us survive."

But I believe there's an important nuance: even after tragedy and trauma, even after pandemic and racist violence and losing so much, we still affirm that there is good in the world. There is good to be found and there is good to be done. Even in the darkest moments, there is still light that lies ahead.

Today is a day, recognizing the trauma we've all experienced, to recite *Gomel*. But today is also a day to recite *Shehechianu* and look ahead.

At this juncture, from the vantage point of the first morning of the first day of this brand new year, I think of the important Jewish traditions which offers many rituals to give structure and elevated meaning to the beginning of the day. When we first wake up, we may wish we could stay under the covers for a bit longer. We may be anxious for that first cup of coffee or a hot shower. We may be overwhelmed before we even stand up if our mind starts to consider all that we need to do during the day.

Because of this, Judaism offers a specific set of rituals to us. They're a roadmap of sorts, so we don't have to figure out how to get started with the day. They allow us to focus.

There are three blessings. First, *Modeh/Modah Ani*: I stand before You in thanksgiving, Almighty God who gives us life and sustains us, for You have returned my soul to me with compassion.

Second, a blessing that gives thanks for our body, and third, a blessing for the soul.

No matter how we feel, no matter what lies ahead in the day: let us create a discipline and a focus that says “I’m still here. I have a body. I have a soul, a life force within.”

And then there’s a creative addition to this, from Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great sage of Tsfat.

Tsfat is a beautiful city, perched high in the mountains in the north of Israel. It is an artist’s colony and a place of tremendous creativity. It is also a place filled with magic and mystery, and the focal point of Jewish mysticism.

Rabbi Luria lived in Tsfat in the sixteenth century. He was known to teach a morning blessing: “Here I am, ready to take upon myself the sacred charge of my Creator: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Luria’s blessing adds an action to the traditional ritual: let us use our body and our soul to do something important; to love your neighbor as yourself.

The journey from last Rosh HaShana to now has been unlike any that we have ever experienced. The disruptions have been extraordinary. There has been loss and pain in so many different ways.

There is a temptation, I think, to view this new year as a time to reset...to treat the beginning of 5781 as a blank slate.

And yet, it's not.

Yes, today is the first day of a brand new year. Yes, we can certainly hope and pray that the coming year will be one of healing and restoration. We pray that this coming year will be one that sees hatred and violence disappear.

But, we can't simply leave the old year behind. The challenges continue and the trauma we've experienced is in us. We are not at a new beginning, but rather we are continuing to build on all that has come before.

I lift up a teaching from David ben Gurion, first Prime Minister of Israel. “It is 2500 years since the age of the prophets. We now live in another world. Our generation and those who come after us will mold their lives in conditions of which the ancients never dreamed. But human values have not changed. The values of truth and righteousness, mercy and peace, and the love [of our neighbor] continue to be upheld, at least as ideals. The old worlds may have gone, but the contribution of their spiritual giants has left an ineffaceable imprint on all who have come later, and whether we are of it or not, we are nourished by it.”

While it may be tempting, our task today is not to lock away the past year and try and start over. We don't really live in another world now, just one that continues to evolve. Our opportunity today is to refocus and reorient ourselves. In a sense, what we can do on this first day of the year is not forget the past, but go back to the beginning.

We're still here. We are waking up to a brand new day and a brand new year. Let us give thanks for body and soul and how we can use them for healing. How can we love ourselves and how we can love one another?

We woke up this morning. It's Rosh HaShana, the first of Tishrei, the first day of 5781. We have another chance, this day and this year, to create. If you like the imagery, there's a brand new Book of Life that is now open, filled with blank pages.

What will we find in the Book this year? What will we write on its pages? What will we create?

In part, I pray we will enable the fulfillment of the charge offered by French poet Emmanuel Eydoux (pen name of Roger Eisinger of Marseilles, 1913-1992)

*To open eyes when others close them
To hear when others do not wish to listen
To look when others turn away
To seek to understand when others give up
To rouse oneself when others accept
To continue the struggle even when one is not the strongest
To cry out when others keep silent
To be a Jew it is that
It is first of all that
And further
To live when others are dead
And to remember when others have forgotten*

As we prepare to fill the pages of this new year, we acknowledge: the old year was one of division, of ignorance and hatred. That hasn't disappeared with the turn of a page in the calendar. On this Rosh HaShana and in this new year, we need to love ourselves and love one another more fiercely than ever. We need to embrace one another as brothers and sisters. We need to celebrate the fire that burns within each person we encounter, seeing the potential for good.

I pray for us, on this holy and important day. Let us look into the fires that are burning in our society and see ways to extinguish the flames of violence and destruction that threaten to consume us. Let us look deep into one another, and see the potential we have, together, to heal this broken world and create peace in every corner of the globe.

Today and throughout this year, let us stand up and show up, and remember the example of Abraham that we heard in our Torah reading. God called and he answered “Here I am! I am afraid but I am ready!” Let us remember the example of Moses at the burning bush, looking into the fire and saying “Here I am! I am afraid but I am ready!”

Today and throughout this year, let us stand up and show up, and follow the example of all those who say “You are my brother! You are my sister!”

Today, let us stand up and show up, and recognize the pain of those who are suffering, and demonstrate that we take it personally, and we will not rest when hatred and violence threatens to consume our world.

And today, let us stand up and show up, and remember the example of Dr. King, who proclaimed that “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony...”

Today, let us begin to create that beautiful symphony of sisterhood and brotherhood. May this day be the beginning of a year of healing and love. Today, let us go forth and create light!