

EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2021
Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
Rabbi Niles Goldstein

Shanah Tovah, good yuntif, and a sweet New Year
to each & every one of you,
whether you are here in the sanctuary at CBS
or watching our High Holy Day services at home.//

I want to open my remarks tonight by *thanking* you:
for your patience during our logistical
& technical challenges,
for your participation as we created & maintained
a virtual congregation,
& for your support, both moral & financial,
that has allowed us to continue our sacred mission

of marrying, burying, teaching, counseling,
& celebrating the b'nei mitzvah & other milestones
of the members of our special community.//

I also want to express my gratitude to our president,
Marc Samrick, & to each member of the CBS board
for their leadership & commitment to our shul.//

Despite numerous challenges & obstacles,
our congregation is on stable footing,
& poised for growth.//

Without my partner & music director, Gordon,
& Naama & our teachers working with our youth
& younger families,
we could never educate, & elevate, our community

in the ways that we have.//

Finally, & importantly,

Lauren Kaplan, our synagogue director,

and Leah Savage,

our new education and engagement coordinator,

have joined our team this past year,

and have already had an impact on the shape

& forward momentum of our congregation.//

We are now a more professionalized organization,

and our future is very bright.//

There is a lot for us to be grateful for, and yet,

after the harrowing year we've all just been through,

I'm reminded of the message

on the quintessential Jewish telegram:

“Start worrying. Details to follow.”

What a year it’s been since the last Rosh Hashanah—
we’ve experienced the ongoing pandemic,
an insurrection in our nation’s capital,
widespread acts & expressions of antisemitism,
an oppressive drought,
rising temperatures,
wildfires raging in California & throughout the West,
and violence, death & suffering in Afghanistan, Haiti,
the Middle East, & around the world.”

What’s next?”

There's a lot to worry about,
not only as Americans, but also, maybe especially,
as Jews.//

Many of us look out at our world
and we are only able to see things that appear ugly,
frightening, hateful & dark.//

This perspective is only reinforced on television,
& through the rabbit-hole algorithms
of social media.//

As a result of this psychological *saturation*,
after we've been bombarded, incessantly,
with negative news & horrific images,
many, perhaps *most* of us,

are filled with a sense of despair,
a gnawing, disorienting feeling of hopelessness.//
That's why so many people these days are scared,
depressed & lonely.//

Existence itself, the foundation, the *background*
of our lived experiences,
seems pretty bleak, pretty bad,
even though we know it is, at times, punctuated
with moments of joy & goodness.//
Still, we look at those brighter moments,
as intrusions, as foreign objects
on an existential canvas that is, essentially, black.//

From the standpoint of Judaism,
this is a false way of looking at the world,
a perception that is misguided & inaccurate.//
While our faith tradition clearly acknowledges
the suffering, the injustice,
& the uglier aspects of our reality,
it also *affirms* that the world is filled with beauty,
light, celebration, & acts of lovingkindness.//

In the book of Genesis,
at the end of the story of Creation,
God assesses the world &, in aggregate,
judges it to be “very good”—*tov me’od*//

In the Amidah prayer,

a prayer that, traditionally, Jews say every day
 we chant the words *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*—
 “Holy, Holy, Holy. . . .The whole world is filled
 with God’s glory.”//

Rather than being a bleak & black canvas,
 the world from the Jewish perspective is hopeful,
 spiritual, & harmonious.//

The Kotsker Rebbe goes a step further & argues,
 “The person who does not see God *everywhere*
 will not see God *anywhere*.//

As Americans, we know that covid has been horrific,
 that our country is polarized,

that climate change is wreaking havoc in our land
and all over the planet.//

As Jews, we know that antisemitism is real
& growing,

& that Israel, while complicated,
is often attacked unfairly when compared to
the treatment of other countries.//

And yet, we need to keep a proper perspective.//

The Jewish people, & humanity as a whole,
have been through much worse before.//

And every time, we have been resilient,
we have evolved,
we have learned from past challenges & grown.//

Life is not a rigid dichotomy—

It's not all good or all bad; it is, rather, a *blending*
of light & darkness, of happiness & pain.//

And its composition changes,

based on where we are in history

& where we are in our own lives.//

Politics, health, relationships, financial security

—all these things, & many more,

have great impact on the way we view the world,

and our place in it.//

As we begin this new Jewish year,

may our traditions, our prayers & our community

lift our hearts & improve our sight.//

May our perspective be balanced & true,
grounded, not in fear, but in a sense of possibility
& hopefulness.//

May we be inscribed in the Book of Life together,
one people, one destiny, one vision
of a world that, while flawed & broken,
awaits our best efforts to mend it & make it whole
once again.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God's will