

Renew Us to Resilience  
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5780  
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When I was little, my family lived in this amazing house. Two stories, with a computer room, guest room, and bathroom downstairs, and three bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and living room upstairs. The dining room opened up onto a sizeable deck that had a good view into the branches of the maple trees in the backyard, where we could see birds hatching each spring. The deck had stairs down into the backyard where we had a vegetable garden, a patio with gigantic lilac bushes at two corners, and strawberry patch between them. On one side of the house, there was a dogwood tree that I loved to climb and a willow tree that had the perfect spot to sit and read. Lining that side of the house were tiger lilies, grape hyacinth, daffodils, and other flowers. The other side of the house had a gravelly parking area that grew little daisy-like flowers and a steep hill that was perfect for sledding down in the winter and a shallower hill that was great for summertime slip-n-slides.

In case you couldn't tell, I loved that house. Even though I haven't lived there for more than twenty-five years, I still remember it as home. And I miss it. Moving out of it at the end of third grade was heart-breaking and traumatic. I even wrote about how much I missed that house for a sixth grade writing assignment. All I wanted was to go back home. To some extent, I still want that house back...and with it the life I had when I lived there. Things were so good back then.

Ahh, the good old days. Remember those? Remember when life was simple? When neighbors knew each other? When kids spent the afternoons and weekends playing outside unsupervised and made up games with what they could find? When adults could spend a lazy summer evening with friends and neighbors, chatting over cool drinks or playing a game of cards while the kids were off playing? Things were so good back then

There's a verse from the Book of Lamentations that we sang at the beginning of this service and that we sing when we return the Torah to Ark—*Chadeish yameinu k'kedem*, renew our days as before. I've often understood it as a prayer to go back to the Garden of Eden, the idyllic, perfect world. Bring us back, we pray, to a time, a place, where life was simple and easy and good. Bring us back to a time when challenges, choices, responsibilities were few and far between—or at least didn't require too much thought. Bring us back to happiness, innocence, and peace.

Except...anyone know how long tradition says Adam and Eve actually lived in the Garden of Eden? A maximum of twelve hours. They were created during the daylight hours of the sixth day, were convinced to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil by mid-afternoon, realized they were naked and took advantage of that situation before fashioning clothes out of fig leaves, and were banished from the Garden before the first Shabbat started at sunset. Even for Eden's only inhabitants, the experience of

perfection was barely a blip in their lives, let alone the span of human existence, and they didn't understand what they had until it was lost.

Recently I heard a new interpretation of the verse *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*, renew our days as before. Rabbi Robert Scheinberg references a midrash to remind us that *kedem* has another meaning than "before." In the biblical text, it often means "east," as in "north, south, west, east." When Adam and Eve were banished from paradise, they were sent *mikedem l'Gan Eden*, to the east of the Garden of Eden. Their life—human life really—began east of Eden. Perhaps, then, when we ask God to *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*, we're asking God not to return us to the paradise of before, but to the point where we begin to live.

We know that life is not simple and idyllic. Though we might wish it when times are especially difficult, we know that that sort of life would be boring and mostly meaningless. It's challenge and risk that make life interesting. It's our success or failure in dealing with those challenges—or at least the commitment to the risk—that mark the milestones of our lives. And it's our learning and growth that give our lives meaning.

Think of the highlights of your life. Were they part of an extended period of peace and tranquility or did they precede or follow times of challenge or difficulty? Challenge, by the way, doesn't have to be bad or traumatic. It can be exciting and desirable. This morning's Great Race, doing something new at work, and raising a child, among many other examples, are all good challenges. They all require a good deal of effort and thought and growth. There are times when success seems impossible and times when it's within reach.

I know, right now some of you are trying to come up with a milestone or highlight that was lovely and peaceful and devoid of hardship. That's OK, go for it. The exercise is more important than whether I'm right or wrong. But I do think that, for most of us most of the time, the milestones we appreciate came around a challenge, and the more difficult the challenge, the more we appreciate having gotten through it.

Many of us, however, don't get to choose our challenges. Instead of climbing mountains to reach our goals, life has thrown us into deep valleys of illness, terror, despair, or heartache. Climbing out of these is one of the hardest things we ever have to do. If we're lucky, we have the chance to catch our breath on easy terrain before using our newfound and hard-earned skills to embrace a challenge of our own choice. Some of us, though, spend our whole lives trying to claw our way out of those valleys, praying for a ledge on which to rest before continuing the climb, slipping, and climbing again. We're not looking for Eden, we're looking for solid footing. Like Adam and Eve who were thrown into turmoil and terror, we just want some help with our next steps. And even though it may not look or feel like strength and growth, it truly is.

Each time we stretch to reach a goal or are stretched to deal with hardship, we grow in some capacity. We acquire tools, skills, experiences that help us when we have to deal with challenge in the future. Physically, emotionally, intellectually, we know how to stretch, so the next time something comes up; we don't start over from scratch.

After being banished from the Garden, Adam and Eve did have start from scratch. But they grew and adapted and learned how to live a new sort of life. East of Eden, they became independent, thoughtful, and strong. East of paradise, they developed the tools and the capacity to deal with hardship and challenge.

This is how Rabbi Scheinberg interprets *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*: “renew our lives, as you renewed our lives after we were exiled from the Garden of Eden.” Renew us, not to a “formerly perfect condition, but rather [to] resilience, [to] the ability to renew ourselves after future crises and dislocations, just as our lives have been renewed before.” Remind us of what we have within us from earlier difficulties and renew our ability to get through whatever we are facing.

I don't really want to go back to my old house. Or, at least, only a small part of me does. I've driven by a few times and looked it up on Google Maps, and it's not the paradise that it once was. But when I think about that house, when I remember what it was like to live there and what I went through having to move, I can't help but consider how much of who I am today developed out of it. Yes, there were many blessings of living in that house, but it's the blessings of skill, strength, and resilience that I acquired in leaving that have sustained me through other challenges. And it's those blessings—not the innocence and ease and peace of living in that house—that I continue to rely on through life.

As we begin this new year, 5780, I wish you the renewal of strength, skill, resilience, independence, and thoughtfulness to sustain you through whatever the coming year brings and whatever challenges you seek out. And of course, may the year also bring plenty of opportunities for relaxation, ease, and peace, as together we say, Amen.