

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
Hope For Our Children and Our World

Twelve years ago today, on the morning of the New Year 5767, I delivered a Rosh Hashanah sermon at my congregation in California. I looked a little different then. Twelve years ago, I was nearly eight months pregnant with twins. My sermon was a letter to my then unborn children, which raised timely questions about the world in which they were about to be born into. I was troubled by the rampant climate change and lack of human responsibility to care for our planet and its creatures. I shared questions and concerns, fears and hopes.

Rosh Hashanah is the time each year when we see the world over and over again by each generation through the millennia. We praise the masterpiece of God's ongoing work of creation. And we also recognize where the world has fallen short.

Today, in these tumultuous times, as my sons are nearing their teenage years, it is time to revisit my fears and my hopes, not only for my kids, but for all children; for our generation, and for the generation that will follow.

Dear Children,

A week ago you began middle school, and this year you will start to study to become *b'nai mitzvah*. I am so proud of you. Yet, I look out into the world in which you are growing up, and I am afraid. You and your peers are bombarded by screens and the constant buzz of technology. Your generation is experiencing higher levels of anxiety and depression. Your generation is growing up in a world troubled by natural disasters, the truth about global warming, severe racial and economic divides, and bitter political strife in our country. You were in tears on the morning after the presidential election. I worry about whether I should have the news on in the car, and what you are hearing. The news often portrays more hatred than kindness.

Last spring, your *Aba* and I took you on your first trip to New York City. The trip was filled with a fascinating ferry ride to the Statue of Liberty, climbing rocks in Central Park, and delicious deli sandwiches. We also stopped at the National 9/11 Memorial. We stared into the deep chasm of inscribed names of people who lost their lives. I recalled how I stared at our television screens on that terrible morning one week before Rosh Hashanah. We stared at the smoke and dust, as we lost our sense of security in the world. Tomorrow, our second day of Rosh Hashanah, is September 11th.

You are growing up in a world of terrorist attacks, hate marches, immigrant children torn apart from their parents at the borders of our country, and senseless school shootings. When I carried you twelve years ago, it never entered my mind that one day when I sent you off to school to learn and grow, it might be for the last time. The parents of Sandy Hook elementary school children, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students,

did not think this. As a parent and rabbi and citizen of this country, I am deeply disturbed by the rise of gun violence we have witnessed in recent years. Our lives are so precious. And our youth deserve more.

It is a hard time to be growing up. We want to protect our children. And yet, we are criticized for being inattentive parents, or overbearing or helicopter parents who are smothering our children's independence. What are we to do? This question is not just for those of us who have children at home. It is a question for all of us. Sociologist Robert Putnam in his recent book called, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crises*, reminds us that despite the growing gaps and challenges in our country, these kids are all *our* kids. They are part of our community and our society. This question is directed to all of us who are responsible for raising up the next generation, and continuing our legacy on this earth.

Now boys, with two parents as rabbis, you know that your *Ima* and *Aba* often deliver sermons at temple... and at home. Our lives are guided by our Jewish values. And we believe that Judaism offers strength and guidance during both joyful and troubling times. Judaism offers relevant responses to these challenging questions of our day. Judaism holds fear and hope in balance.

I want to share a *midrash* with you. It is an interpretation about how God came to choose Abraham to become the father of the people of Israel. Every Rosh Hashanah morning we read the chilling tale of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. (Genesis 22) In that moment when Abraham's knife is raised, before the ram appears to take Isaac's place, our hearts skip a beat. That moment captures the fear that all parents and other adults, teachers and caregivers hold in our hearts when we take on the responsibility for raising up the next generation.

Let us go back in the Torah for a moment to how Abraham was singled out in the first place. Surely, Abraham must have done something to earn God's affection? I think you have heard the *midrash* about Abraham smashing his father's idols and declaring his belief in one God. (*Bereshit Rabba* 38) There is another *midrash*. This story goes that Abraham was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*, a castle lit up, ablaze with brightness, and there he gained consciousness of God for the first time. (*Bereshit Rabba* 39:1)

What did Abraham really see? Some say that the castle was simply radiating beautiful light. Other commentators understand a more literal reading of the Hebrew word, *doleket* – for them the palace was lit up because it was burning, engulfed in flames. The difference is profound, especially when the castle in the *midrash* represents God's world. Depending on our perspective, the world is either raging with destruction or bright with beauty.¹

¹ Thank you to Rabbi David Stern and to Rabbi Rolando Matalon for their sermons on the theme of the burning castle and for teaching various interpretations of the classical midrash. Rabbi David Stern, "The Burning Castle: Rosh Hashanah 5776," Temple Emanuel. Rabbi J. Rolando Matalon, "Chag v'Chesed Holiday Dvar Tzedek: Rosh Hashanah 5768," American Jewish World Service.

What kind of castle, what kind of world, do we see today? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel challenges us to see both images in our world. He wrote, “One may look upon the world with enthusiasm and absorb its wonder and radiant glory; one may also see and be shocked by its ugliness and evil.” (*A Passion for Truth*) As we travel from place to place in our lives, we ought to see beauty as well as degradation. The *birah doleket* in which we live is both engulfed in destructive flames and bathed in glorious light.

My dear children, I hope that you imagine the world as *your* castle. And yes, as you continue to grow older, at times it will seem like the castle is burning with despair. And at times, you will witness its brilliant light and majesty.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we both celebrate the world and claim responsibility for the parts that need fixing. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflects on our *midrash*, saying, “Jewish faith begins not in wonder that the world *is*, but in protest that the world is not as it *ought* to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Abraham’s journey begins.” (*A Letter in the Scroll*)

Kids, what is your cry, and what is your responsibility? Where does your journey begin? I know these are big questions. But I don’t want you to worry. The burden is not only on your smaller shoulders. These questions should be asked of all of us. You have always loved the part of the service on Rosh Hashanah when we hear the blast of the *shofar*. Today, the *shofar* is our collective cry, and it is our wake up call to respond. Our tradition emphasizes communal responsibility and action. I want to share three lessons with you from our faith, a few ways we might see more light than darkness.

The first lesson is to remember that we are all descendants of Abraham and Sarah. And Abraham was, in the words of my mentor and teacher, CCAR President Rabbi David Stern, “Judaism’s first responder.” Tomorrow, when we again encounter the day that is etched into the memory of the American people, we will remember not only those who lost their lives, but we will also honor the first responders. We know that they played a deeply significant role in saving lives, and helping to rebuild families and communities.

You see, the *midrash* does not end when Abraham sees the castle burning. The startling sight sparks Abraham’s attention, so he asks if the castle has a master. The *midrash* ends with God calling out to him from amidst the flames. Abraham refuses to look away. Abraham responds. And Abraham and Sarah become the parents of a great nation. And we are their children.

We come from a long line of first responders. From Moses who heard the cry of the Israelite slaves, to Nachson who took the first step into the waters, to Miriam who sustained our people in the desert with her well, to the prophets who heard God’s voice when it was hard to hear, to the rabbis of the Talmud who kept Torah alive, to Theodore Hertzl who had a vision of a Jewish homeland, to Israeli soldiers who protect the land and its people, to Abraham Joshua Heschel who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on behalf of civil rights, to the Reform Jewish teens who mobilized on behalf of gun

violence prevention this year and showed up as a strong, sacred force at the March for our Lives in Washington and around the country.

Carly Schwamm, the president of NFTY Southern Tropical Region, which includes Parkland, powerfully articulated NFTY's imperative to act: "We will not sit back and do nothing. We will not let this permanently break our community. But, most importantly, we will never forget. Our community cannot, and should not, and will not be statistics." (*After Parkland: How We're Mobilizing to Prevent Gun Violence*, Zachary Hermann, URJ) We continue our people's legacy when we respond to the flames that we see burning with injustice in our day. Children, I hope you know that Judaism empowers you to make a difference.

The second lesson is how putting on our Jewish lenses can help us to see the beauty in the castle even when things seem grim. When the sun sets in the evening, we recite, "May we lie down in peace, O God, and rise up to new life – *Hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu l'shalom v'ha'amideinu malkeinu l'chayim*." And when we awake in the morning the words we utter are, *Modeh ani l'fanecha* – Thank you God for restoring my soul and your faith in me." I like to call this the Jewish attitude of gratitude. Blessings of thanksgiving frame the moments of our days. You know how many blessings the Talmud instructs us to say each day: 100. Yes, there is ugliness. But there is beauty, too.

This is why we insist on going for hikes with you, swimming in the cold ocean, trying new foods, practicing your instrument, doing things as a family, celebrating Shabbat, calling your grandparents, helping people who are in need, picking up after ourselves, shoveling your neighbor's driveway, being kind to your peers, and being polite and grateful. I know you do not always understand why your parents insist on these things. I hope these things will help you to see that there is beauty in nature, there is beauty in music, there is beauty in supportive community, there is beauty in kindness and love, and there is beauty in saying thank you for our blessings.

There is also beauty in hope. Not the kind of hope that "everything is gonna be all right." But hope that shines through resistance and perseverance, struggle and joy. Judaism affirms the eternal value of *tikvah*, of hope in the face of fear. I hope that you and your generation will live out the hopes and dreams of my generation, and the generation before me. This is what it means to be part of a chain of tradition that has held on to a glimmer of hope for thousands of years. This is what it means to look upon the *ner tamid*, the eternal light that shines over every sanctuary.

I hope that when things seem dark, you will find sources of light to guide you. I know kids, you don't want more speeches, but studies have shown how church and synagogue affiliation can help guide youth, offer social networks and support, strengthen relationships with families, structure time for philanthropy and good works, and foster meaning in all of our lives. (*The Spiritual Child*, Lisa Miller) Whatever that source may be - temple, school, friends, other adults in your lives – I pray that you will see the light and the beauty in our world, and know that there is always hope.

There is one other message I want to impart for now. This lesson comes from the prayer we are about to hear during the Shofar Service: “*Hayom Harat Olam* – Today the world is born anew.... As we are your children, love us in the way of mothers and fathers. As we are Yours in service, guide us by the light of Your justice, grace, and holiness.” (*Machzor*)

The metaphor of parenthood is a common theme during these holy days. See, it is not just your mom who says these things. These are timeless words meant for all of us. Each year we read the biblical stories of prolonged childlessness, struggles and yearning experienced by Sarah and Hannah. We sing, “*Avinu Malkeinu*,” “Our Father, Our King,” or, “Our Parent, our Sovereign.” At this time of year, more than any other, we are asked to think of our relationship to God as that of a child to a parent. We know that this relationship can be complex, sometimes fraught with rebellion and strife. Yet, a parent’s love is eternal. It offers us comfort when we are afraid. This is why in our prayer we plead, “As we are your children, Oh God, love us in the way of mothers and fathers.”

In other words, we are all God’s children. And no matter how badly we might mess up ourselves or mess up our world, we can still feel God’s love. Feel the love surrounding us today. You are not alone.

Children, please ask yourselves, what kind of world do you want to grow up in? How will you add your light to the universe? Many years ago, Abraham was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*, a castle ablaze with brightness. In it, he saw the flames of injustice, and the beauty of hope. He sensed a sacred summons, and so, his journey began. And so, too, does our own.

I know that you might be surprised that I delivered this letter, this sermon to you on the *bima*. Know that this letter is not just for you, and the sermons we offer at the synagogue are not just for the congregation. They are the sermons we need to hear, too. I hope that we will all be first responders to the ugliness that desecrates our world. I hope we will all find light even in places of darkness. I hope that we will have the resolve to renew and renew ourselves, and our world again and again. In the years ahead, I hope that we will build a castle that is filled with kindness and courage, Torah and love. May all our deeds keep our world shining.

Love,
Ima