

*Work in Progress – Rosh Hashanah  
September 27, 2020 – 10 Tishrei 5781  
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester  
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This sermon is a work in progress. It's scattered on my hard drive in 7 or 8 versions. It's printed out with endless edits on each sentence, notes in the margin, red cross outs and furiously rewritten passages on the back of each sheet. Its goal is clear, its idea is reaching toward its ideal. I know what I want to say. Can I get it out? Can I make it come across from screen, to page, to pulpit, to video camera, to your screen? I know what I'm going for. I hope that you can hear it, too, can hear it in this work in progress.

These services are a work in progress. So much polish. So much editing. More planning, even, than the switch a few years ago to a new machzor, a new High Holy Day prayer book, the one that you now have in your lap at home rather than in the pew in the sanctuary. Each part planned in June. Music recorded in July. Sermons and prayer recorded before Labor Day. All pieced together into a coherent whole, God willing. Then again, the parts of the service have always been a work in progress. The prayers that we imagine God giving to Moses on Mt. Sinai having really come together over generations, over millennia – literally. And each generation adds – words, prayers, paragraphs, melodies – so many melodies – their own times and perspectives layered on top of a bedrock buried in myth and history and the places where those meet. But always striving for the same ideals: repentance, prayer, charity, divine forgiveness. Services are always evolving. These services are a work in progress.

Our congregation is a work in progress. Every year new goals, new boards, new needs, new staff, new directions, new personalities, new ideals and new challenges. Built on nearly 70 years of hopes and dream, of visions, of desires. Built on 70 years of idealism mixed with the business of synagogue life. Not always ideal but for every one step back we work together to take two steps forward, two steps towards the ideal of sacred community, beloved community, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, religiously fulfilling kehillat kodesh – holy community. Which, of course, can only be – has only ever been – a work in progress.

These last six months have been a work in progress. Even as we learn more and more about the disease and the virus, we never know when it will peak or surge, when it will strike someone we know or a community we care about. Those of us who plan far into the future – vacations and weddings and family visits and theater tickets – all of it on pause. Living, instead, moment to moment. Sometimes ranging far out of our homes with masks and outdoors and even with family or friends. And sometimes at home, in four walls and perhaps a yard or a terrace. A screen, God willing, gives us some access to the outside world, to the connections and relationships that sustain us in person and, now across 1s and 0s. These six months have been a work in progress. Work has been reinvented. Gone the office space and the water cooler and the bump-into-you-in-the-hall replaced by an endless series of zoom meetings and scheduled check-ins taking up blue or purple blocks on a digital calendar. Gone is the bridge table in the social hall, the country club, the community center. Replaced, hopefully, by an online game, new technologies for a favorite hobby to keep the mind sharp with tricks and bids and points. Good. Not the same. A work in progress.

Our schools are a work in progress. Public or private we look to our schools to teach our kids, to help them reach their potential, to give every student an equal shot. We've come so far. More women in science and math helping us understand our world. Who else are we missing? Anyone, anyone can expand our horizons. What of the poor, the black and brown, the gay and transgender and the bullied, the millions written off as too learning disabled or too rural or too poor or too average. Teaching is hard. Learning is hard. So much more so during these days of pandemic. But working together teachers and students and parents and administrators and community members can lift each child, each precious, unique, miraculous child to the heights of their potential and beyond to the very edge of their dreams and passions in ways that will bring blessings to our schools and the communities beyond. Raise the expectations, provide the resources. Surely the richest nation in human history can do this. The ideal is clear – give each child a free, safe, quality education. The path takes work. Our schools are a work in progress.

Our nation is a work in progress. It always has been. Have you read the constitution? It's a mess, impossible. So flawed that before it could be ratified it had to be amended not once but ten times! And many of those amendments contains more than one promise. Our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution set us up for the struggle of progress with structures for debate and ideals towards which we could strive in an attempt to thrive. The very fact of a mechanism for amendments means that our founders knew that things would evolve and change and contract and grow. A mechanism for progress that would take a lot of work.

Inherent in that work lies a commitment to debate and disagreement. People never agree. We struggle for our ideas. When necessary – as in 1776 or 1861 – Americans fought for those ideals with blood. But the Constitution sought a different battlefield, a battlefield of ideas, a system of government that used disagreement and compromise and tension in the service of creativity – creative tension. Ingenious. And daring. And scary. And deeply flawed. And so much better than dictatorial authoritarianism. So much better than monarchy or the will of one group imposed on another or, God forbid, the tyranny of the majority under which Jews suffered so during our millennia of exile and wandering.

Creative tension allows for progress in our work in progress as a nation. Debate and compromise can lead to innovative solutions, new perspectives, new levels of cooperation and respect. Or it can lead to bitterness, acrimony, recrimination, and objectification of those with whom we disagree. On all the kindling of disagreement and dehumanization that lies in our streets today, we now pour the accelerant of Facebook and Twitter and other social media sites that echo our convictions and demonize the other without engaging one another. Instead of thoughtful debate, too many of us accept as inevitable, become numb to, inflammatory rhetoric from political leaders and pundits with excuses: “Who cares what they say?!” “Their policies are good!” We cannot forget the truth of our creation story that words make reality. Words can lead to progress. Or words can bring violence when we cling to our self-interest to excuse dehumanizing words from the people who should lead us. In this environment, disagreement rises, debate disappears, humanity fades, means become ends unto themselves – the surest path to tragedy. Just tension. No creativity. No progress.

We can do better. We can move this nation forward, this work in progress. We know this from our history. Our history so filled with justice and triumph and progress. Our history so filled with racism and slavery, misogyny, anti-Semitism, anti-Irish and anti-Catholic rhetoric. Our history as a nation of immigrants who forget their origins within a generation or two. How can this history serve as a foundation for a path forward despite the sins of our past? Because mixed with rot are seeds of promise and some very strong cornerstones. Time and again our nation has planted seeds of virtue in questionable soil and seen growth and progress and come steps closer to realizing the promise of America. The misdeeds of America's past does not condemn the whole project, does not curse our future. As surely as a fallen tree feeds the next generation of forest growth, the deeds and misdeeds of America's past provide fertile lessons and perspectives for the next step in America's progress. Our messy, aggravating system of government allows us to transform the darker parts of our history into the very tools we need to realize this country's great promise. The promise of a work in progress.

A work in progress can never be perfect. By its definition, it is imperfect, not what we usually expect from ourselves, from others, from the organizations and institutions upon which we rely. The last six months have required us to accept imperfection, particularly in this community of high achievers. It strains our relationships and expectations and can leave us disappointed. But maybe lower expectations would be okay. Maybe this will allow for a bit of a re-alignment. When things go back to normal, perhaps we will no longer expect perfect, perhaps we'll learn to settle for good. What would that free us to do, to think, to experience. How much time and energy do we put into the last 10%, the last 15%? Imagine if we stopped at 90%, or even 85%. Imagine what we could do with that balance of time and energy? Invest it in relationships, in neglected hobbies and interests, in a good book, in time with our children, in exercise, or maybe just an afternoon nap. Might the last six months of work in progress allow us to accept ourselves as works in progress? Might they give us permission to be imperfect and might that liberate us in some way to be more, well, human?

Every year, the High Holy Days remind us that we are works in progress. They remind us that we've been imperfect in the preceding year. They remind us that we can be better in the year to come. The fact that they come every year tells us that we will never achieve perfect. That we will always be works in progress. God-willing, next year we will not be reminded of this everywhere we look, God-willing things will go back to normal and it will take days of prayer to remind us that we are works in progress. But in the meantime it is good to know that our Days of Awe have a message whose relevance rhymes so perfectly with this moment. Our communities and society and synagogue, our lives themselves are not just work, they are works in progress. May we learn to hew to the ideals for which we strive and trust that over time, over years and decades and generations we will move closer to those ideals because we not only work, we progress.

L'Shana tova